

Infinite Regress, Under Duress

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Infinite Regress, Under Duress

by [jamnesias](#)

Summary

They don't meet, they nearly meet, they do meet, 10 years is not long enough to describe all the ways in which this is a disaster (but they definitely give it a go), and the world nearly ends before they overcome the general idiocy: a tale of optical feedback, tattoos, and spats.

Notes

The alternate title for this is 'You Are An Idiot'?

Thank you to the incomparable ikchen for German translations, and to Pookaseraph for early occasional beta-checking, and everyone who helped me to maintain my sanity...

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Newt broke his left shin (*tibial shaft fracture*) when he was 6, falling out of a tree.

His parents freaked when he hobbled in, but his Uncle kept them calm as they bundled him into the back of the Volvo and took him to hospital. He cried more out of shock, than pain. Because, *ow!*

The thing that stopped his tears, unexpectedly, once he was sitting on the hospital bed with his leg carefully propped up, his curls mussed and still full of leaves and mom holding his hand, wasn't pain medication, but seeing his x-ray. He broke off crying, and *stared*.

“Of course you did. How *predictable*,” Gottlieb tells him, in a breath like a sigh.

They are in the Lima Shatterdome, and have been working together for 5 weeks. That morning Newt had been re-watching footage of Trespasser and Karloff and Scissure's destructions, and so was hypothesising over lunch, talking rapid-fire about lizard limb regeneration, nerve stimuli, the potential of what they might see next, the capacity the kaiju seem to have to continue moving despite injury, like walking on broken legs - which is pretty fucking cool. He'd mentioned his own mid-sentence and gone on to continue, but Gottlieb had looked up suddenly from his tray, his (rumours have it) ‘lasagne’, and what had appeared to be ignoring Newton but apparently wasn’t, and asked. Blurted.

“How did you manage that?”

Weeeell. Newt had paused. There was no wild-card, there; no cool or dramatic story, nothing *unique*. Unfortunately. He wanted to impress Gottlieb, he can admit it, sure. In the past when asked if he'd ever broken a bone, he used to make up varied, exciting explanations, particularly when he was a teenager and realised that girls, and boys, smelled really, really good and had great hands and hey, feel this awesome bump in my shin, let me tell you about it... Particularly when thoughts and reasons became so easy to come up with, to extrapolate and justify. Particularly because he is super fucking *smart* and he really likes trying out new things, and he was a slightly desperate kid, yeah. Desperate for a lot of shit.

Shit which he generally turned out to be very good at doing.

Except calligraphy, that one time.

Now, though. Stories weren't going to work. Not after kaiju have appeared, after terrible, awesome things, after— just, After, the unseen capital letter implied – that doesn’t work. He can’t do that. Not here. Not in the Shatterdome, not when the inky crust over his first kaiju tattoo (first, because he knows now that he will get more, just like he knows there will be more kaiju; he knew it as soon as the itching burn began on his skin and he realised that he *loved* it) over his right arm has long since flaked off and they’re really there forever. They’re real.

Not to Gottlieb, who Newt can tell isn't really the type to get sucked in by exaggeration. Not with those considering, interested eyes on him.

They’re kind of brown, kind of gold.

Huh.

So, Newt had taken half a breath in and unexpectedly answers, honestly.

After his sarcasm, Gottlieb looks back down at his notes and continues it. “Of course *you* climbed trees as a boy.”

Newt rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, Dr. Gottlieb, whilst, since you were never actually a child yourself, there’s no way *you* would have.”

Because fuck, seriously. *Jesus*, it was as if Gottlieb had been spontaneously birthed as he was: perpetually 54 years old with the hair of a toddler. He was a natural singularity. It totally warranted further study because who *could* imagine that? Not even Newt. This guy? Playing? Please.

But it’s not true, and After - which is a different kind of time period altogether, post-saving the world, and, he knows, a much better placemaker for life as he knows it to be now: B.D. (Before Drift) and A.H. (After Hermann) – After, he knows the truth. He sees it in the Drift. Hermann pulling himself up onto the wall between their garden and their neighbour’s again and again; to determinedly count stars, to check constellations against his book, to watch planes with his head tilted back and his hands on his hips, and his 8 year old arms had wobbled, his elbows cold from the snow, when he pulled himself up there the first time, Christmas Eve morning, his heart pounding, all so that he and his brother could throw their aeroplanes off further, higher - and so *that* is what having older siblings taunt you and push you into doing things you half don’t want to, and half are grateful to them for making you, feels like.

Good to know.

“Well anyway, it was a pretty big deal for me at the time,” he adds, in the mess hall, shrugging at Gottlieb - who says nothing else. So Newt sticks his tongue out on impulse and turns away to answer a question from Joe, their best analyst. End of.

That was actually his biggest understatement, that day.

That year.

Ever.

So the way his bones had knit and mended, the way his skin itched underneath the cast, the way it differentiated him from what he was before yet could not be seen except under the skin - the fact that it won't be something he passes on to his children but *will* be a shadow on an x-ray until he dies, the way it will never be known except if you get *inside* him, take a look— How it’s him, all *him*, himself a copy, himself an extension of others and yet singular, alone, unique...

This had all helped decide his first, and enduring, area of study. Of love.

Biology, dude.

Awesome.

When Hermann is six, he inherits a collection of Spirographs from his elder brother.

They are positively antique by then, if still having a slight resurgence in popularity around Europe,

but where his siblings tire quickly of it, Hermann is deeply fascinated. As fascinated as a child of six can be - but then, not many six year olds can think like Hermann.

The patterns are beautiful, the certainty of them pleasing, the logic infallible. The *shapes*. He *knows* these. He watches them unfold in wonder, drawing with his bottom lip caught in his teeth, wiping his hair out of his eyes over and over, and reaching for new sheets of A3.

He is a child in love with numbers, with infinity. Space. He leafs through astronomy books, begs his parents to read him ancient Norse and Teutonic legends. His knees are perpetually pink from sitting with heavy books from Father's study on them, from scuffing them as he pulls himself up the neighbour's wall, from being pushed over by his brother and sisters. Tickle fights are appallingly tiresome when he is forcibly dragged into them, but he has long fingers and skinny arms and, on occasion, wins.

He leaps ahead in mathematics, breaching gaps of logic that most adults can't. It comes to him so easily, has always come to him so easily, it is as though he can say *I already know this*, and his first look at spiralling equations is like a moment of recognition because he already sees numbers like that. Inside his mind, they are *so beautiful*. They have their own map, their own constellations. He sees them with his own spacing; the numbers are never flat but extra dimensional, instead, and they move, they connect, they explain themselves...

He tries to explain it to his *parents*, but they cannot understand it. They frown, glance at each other. They make him get his eyes tested, more than once. They try to touch his mind. He is highly gifted at abstract mathematics and fractals are like déjà vu for him. *Why?* No-one can explain it. His siblings are also intelligent, but not like this.

Soon he stops talking about the pure way he sees the numbers. Better simply to study and look at things within his own mind, his own way. It is not until he is an adult, at University, that he hears the word *synesthesia* muttered under his friend Vanessa's breath as she skims an article, and something shifts. Something makes sense. By then his own ability has lessened incrementally, changing from the pure, beautiful shapes of his childhood to something more organised, now underpinned and shaped by the lines of logic and knowledge and research that he has accumulated. Nevertheless it is...reassuring. He was not a mad child, and he is not now.

Then he panics; is it the only reason he is so gifted? Is it the reason he can think like he can? But no. No. He has worked so hard, for so long. That is all his own. He did it. *Him*.

As a child, he has poor instincts in a lot of areas – socially, mostly, which comes from learning early how to ignore taunts, to block out distractions, and becoming *too* good at it. It carries on into adulthood. He can sit in a state of total (in)attention with pages or books in front of him until his Mother or his sister taps his shoulder, or Bastien pokes him in the head to get his attention and makes him scowl and pull his headphones off, or when Vanessa nudges him with her books in the library and makes him blink, look up to her smile. Because he wants, because he wants to get elbow-deep in imagined space, in abstraction. He needs to touch and understand it. Make connections. He needs to. Pi, patterns, integers, algebra. Philosophy. Geometry and equations and engineering are *wonderful*. Heavy, manmade machines that move through the air like skimming water, planes taking off like breath. It *fascinates* him.

When is 10, he goes to the best boarding school in the UK that his parents can find for him, and though he has few friends outside of his siblings, he knows enough not to take the spirographs with him. He will be bullied for that, if nothing else.

He's not wrong, but he's not entirely correct either. The boys find other things to bully him for instead. He almost needn't have worried.

He is mocked for his intellect, his age, for his German accent, for his British one when he returns for holidays. How predictable. Whilst is away, Mother writes to him of her love, observations from home, updates on his grandparents, plans for when he is back. Father writes him with riddles to solve, and he and his siblings write to each other in simple codes, which Hermann always breaks first. His ciphers are the best, of course. He only mentions the bullying once, in a letter to his elder brother, but makes him swear not to pass it on. Dietrich doesn't, ever, but he doesn't like it, and when Hermann comes back for holidays, Dietrich is the first to run forward at the airport line, startling the staff.

As he gets older, the patterns from school are proven again, and again. He learns not to speak German unless he is sure of the people around him. His siblings don't worry about it and tell him not to, but for Hermann, it will always reveal too much, now, an unknown quantity against what he *does* know - that people tends towards the repetitive. So he stops. He gets snippy, clipped, cuts people off before endings he can see in conversation; he pertains instead toward things that he recognises.

He appreciates the classics, always has, but is mostly blind when it comes to himself, so when Mother stops dressing him for the varying weather, he simply carries on the same, and then further, on and on and more. He likes the familiar. He wears pinstripe, wool, tweed. Jumpers he's had for years or that were his brother's. His only concession is shoes: brogues, spats. Patrick Moore is to blame for this. Hermann loves him, deeply. It is a silly story and if he ever tells Newton, Newton will laugh and laugh at him, he is sure. (Until he does tell him, even before their Drift, surprising no-one more than himself.)

He polishes his shoes every day, irons his collars, but forgets everything else. It is inconsequential.

His parents divorce when he is 16 and goes to University early. Though he ought to have seen it coming, and Bastien raises his eyebrow and dares to say, *Come on, Hermann*, it still shakes something in him. Some central truth. He had believed. He trusts less easily. His mother moves back to Wales, and is very happy, his Father carries on advancing further and deeper into his fields.

University, at least, is a revelation. *No-one* mocks his mind. They nurture it, they cultivate his ideas. He takes side courses in the engineering department, graduates early from programming courses, intimidates the IT workers into letting him practise on the machines. He makes one close friend, Vanessa, from Brixton, who is reading Biochemistry and actually has more siblings than him, long, dark curly hair and very expressive hands. There is also Henry, reading Physics, from Oslo, and taller than even Hermann's younger brother. They all bond over getting stuck in the same lecture room, originally. It's inane, but turns out to suit them all well. No one would never have thought to put he and Vanessa together, particularly, so apparently different as they seem, but they work.

Thankfully everyone else leaves him *alone*.

He carries on the tradition of writing to his siblings in codes. Bastien doesn't even *try* anymore, Dietrich uses it to spell rude things, and Karla is generally lapse and prefers to just *talk* to him. There is one email that he sends her that takes her three months to decrypt. In the end all it says inside is him wishing her happy birthday, which is now late. She calls him, exasperated, her German slipping softly into the accent that is most like their grandmother's Welsh, *Hermann, really, you could have just **told** me that.*

He loses his virginity with Vanessa when they are both 19. They take it very seriously. It is special, unique. An Event.

He sets up his room with candles, red roses, and classical music. (Mozart is too varying, Beethoven

too reflective. Bach seems a safe middle bet?) Flattening his hair in the reflection in the window before drawing the curtains, whilst Vanessa changes in his bathroom.

It is— it is fine.

Afterwards, they lay on their backs, under his sheets, Hermann catching his breath again. Vanessa catches his eye sideways, and he looks back, the chorals swell - and unexpectedly she is laughing, and Hermann is chuckling as well. *Anticlimax* is not the correct word, but fits. He laughs with relief and confusion all at once. She rolls and hugs him fiercely around the ribs, then props herself up on one elbow, smoothing his hair off his forehead for him with her fingertips and then tucking her fingers under her chin.

“Perhaps,” he says carefully, “we should never do that again.”

She smiles widely, her dark eyes bright, shining. “I think you’re right.”

He smiles at her. “You are. Beautiful.”

“I *know*,” she says, but her smile goes soft.

Over time, that night becomes simultaneously one of his most treasured memories, and one of the funniest things that has ever happened in his life. He has never been more earnest— more *serious*. Neither of them had. They mock themselves endlessly when they are older. Well, Vanessa instigates mockery and Hermann agrees, wry, a little embarrassed but only in a distant sense.

She calls him two weeks after she leaves for further postgrad abroad, and Hermann has begun another condensed engineering degree at TU Berlin.

“You broke my heart you know. I was a bit in love with you.”

“No you were *not*,” he points out.

She sighs and agrees. “No, true. I was in love with your brain.”

He smiles to himself. “We are attracted to the same things,” he agrees, meaning hers, and how he had loved her too. Loves her.

“Yes,” she says, all seriousness. “Cock.”

He hisses at her and she giggles for the rest of their conversation. She giggles even more when he finally gets his first desperate fumbles - in an alcove in the library, and the doorway by his little flat, and on the way back from the toilet in a coffee shop in town - with Benjamin, his lanky blonde neighbour. Benjamin is doing a PhD in French philosophy and kisses like he is in a hurry, but he is a little more experienced than Hermann, very, inexplicably *keen* on him, and they find their own rhythm quickly. A very *nice* rhythm.

"French?" Vanessa asks, skeptical.

"At least he's not reading poetry," Hermann sniffs, and Vanessa cackles.

When he is 23, he goes skiing in Bavaria with Karla, her boyfriend, and Father planning to join them after a few days. Another continuation of his family’s Winter tradition. (With an extra: Vanessa.)

One day into the trip, he has an accident, if one can call it that when you see it coming; he’s not

convinced. An idiot further up the slope decides to show off, pushing himself and rushing past Hermann's elbows at top speed, making him flinch - and being himself, Hermann tutts and slides across, not wanting to be anywhere near *that* - but he does it too sharply and shudders, spins, and when he looks back forward he sees immediately that he has put himself off course, too quickly. Even after he rights his trajectory he sees that he is fixed for collision with— that's Karla's red suit.

He's going to knock into his sister. Not too fast, but fast enough—

He stabs his sticks into the snow and lets himself jerk and tumble sideways.

Instinct and certainty and stupidity are oddly interconnected.

He would have been fine, in all probability, but by wild bloody chance however his right ski doesn't come off, and they left it until February to come, rather than January, so the snow is malleable on the surface, slipperyhard underneath, and a thousand other factors but mostly his own stupid *self* come into play to mean that instead of stopping, Hermann flips, arcs, his leg twists around the ski for a second and then he crunches into solid snow.

His head hits a bank and he blinks up at sky, blinks light from his eyes and somehow tastes it, bright, in his mouth.

The reconstructive surgery in Munich on his knee, the addition of the pin to his thigh, goes as planned. No issues. Everything is predicted to heal without hindrance. He is ordered to rest, recoup and do strict physio for the next year. Karla cries all over his chin when he wakes up in the hospital with a sodding great bandage on his leg and he purses his lips at her, tries to pat her back and misses, still a little blurry on the drugs, which at least makes Dietrich laugh. No lasting problems. Not the end of the world.

He goes back to the UK, with great plans. Teaching schedules, research. Then six months later, not long after he turns 24, an alien being erupts through the Pacific Ocean and attacks San Francisco.

He is already down to crutches, moving fine, and in the middle of researching two concurrent theses. That day he is in Cardiff, visiting his grandmother in the home she has been moved into. He watches the news on the tv in the lounge with elderly people asleep around him, his leg up on a spare chair, the nurses and carers crowded around in shared, mute horror. His grandmother's hand is slack in his but he doesn't notice that she's fallen asleep again, unable to take in even something this momentous.

Immediately afterwards, Hermann is too busy for anything else. Anything small. His mind *spins*. The world is irrevocably changed and nothing he saw makes any sense. It needs to. What is the probability, what is the *cause*? He neglects the exercises and stretching, furiously making phonecalls, having meetings, sending and replying to emails, requests, being one of the top physics experts in the world, receiving and sending demands, publishing ideas. He knows when his knee starts clicking at least twice a day, and he gets intermittent numbness in his outer thigh, that this will likely go on to cause him problems later in life - but it has so much less magnitude than *this*, than now. This study, this urgent cause.

When he is 25, he works solidly for six days finalising the spiralling lines of code for the first Jaeger programme, and he cannot sleep whilst they program it in. He watches it by computer feed instead, elbows on the desk, leaning on the cane he's come to need on occasion, rubbing at his eyes and staring at the screen as things move and lights and machines whirl, metal flashes. He has that feeling again like, like planes taking off—

When he is 26, he meets Newton Geiszler in Lima, and notices immediately that he has green eyes.

The decade that follows is...unpredictable.

The conference in Seoul, 2014, had them both on the list - of *course* - but they never met in person.

They were in different areas, and turned out to have been seated on opposite sides of the room. As if the universe knew what to do from day one. Abort, abort, *shit*; an unstoppable force is about to meet an immovable object. Or something. Physics is not completely Newton's thing, that's more Hermann. *Anyway*.

During the day they'd moved around the conference in their own ways: Newt flitting, joining every conversation whether invited or not, getting his presentation out of the way at 10am and then fielding questions for the next hour whilst Hermann did a full, thoughtful circuit before giving his presentation on inter-dimensional astronomy and the inversion of physics, with reference to alien presence, round about the same time that Newt got dragged into a debate on tensile strength in conference room B.

Hermann spent all of Dr Geiszler's talk obediently listening to Father and a group of others, outside. He was drilled on the topic of his talk, having to point out that as he had essentially had to *invent the topic* that no, he did not know everything yet. Then he had to discuss gravitational echoes with one ear straining for the echoes from inside the main hall where this talk - the presentation on Body-Mass versus Plausible Creation Theory by N. Geiszler that he'd written onto his own personalised, hand-drawn version of the agenda - with notes – as Number One - was taking place.

He was furious to have missed it, white lipped. He never said a thing to Father.

When Newton realises what talk *he'd* missed later he is loudly, and repetitively to everyone in the hotel bar, super, super fucking pissed. It was the only talk he'd circled *in red pen* on his crumpled print-out, *fuck*.

Abort, abort— theeeeere you go.

Not before K-Day, but after, Hermann's sees a name repeated a lot. In publications, journals. He is attuned to spotting patterns, after all. 'N. Geiszler.'

It appears in PPDC information and updates, in a number of articles with fascinating proposals and ideas. One tiny but luridly printed picture that he had taken a moment to study, in which the Doctor appeared to be throwing up a peace sign.

He has very dark hair, glasses, and looked to be shorter than everyone else in his team. That was about all that could be gleaned from it.

Hermann had queried one point in a publication online - *queried*, not *sniping*, not in any way, and if it *was*, well it was far too much fun to be called that – and received two for one of his own in response, a note in one thread, questioning his integers. *His*. He'd taken a whole five minutes out of his schedule to respond to it, to *destroy* it. He hadn't even recognised the name of the user until the fog of rage had passed.

When he later spent two days researching the acidic radius of kaiju blue with the idea of plotting a square kilometre geometry model, hypothesising that he might be able to work backwards from it to assist in locating the Breach, four times in one day the initials *N.G* and the various, appropriate abbreviations entailed after appear on his screen, in print.

Repetition.

They start being CC'd on the same PPDC emails very quickly. Hastily fired off questions in group meetings. He is invited to join the new team assembling in the Lima shatterdome and agrees, on the condition he can bring his *own* research his *own* way, and the email agreeing lists the rest of the team he will be working with.

Oh, look. How unsurprising.

As he is packing up his things, he gets two emails. One is from Vanessa, telling him that while she knows he never looks at anything popular or *interesting* on the internet, he should know that an artwork rendering of his jaeger code has become the most popular screensaver download ever, and congratulations, will that add another letter to his name?

He blinks, fairly surprised - until he sees the address on the second email in his inbox. He leans in to check, then clicks on it sharply.

Dr. Gottlieb,

Hello, and sorry – or shold I say entschuldigen Sie bitte ;D - for being so forward but I need some help. Great to meet you, sort of, and sorry I didnt in Seoul but don't hold that against me- just hoping you can let me know everythin YOU do before you come on the dimensional radius of the radiation readings in August 2013 for the following co-ordinates...

He has mis-typed the co-ordinates. Hermann spots the mistake immediately.

He also pauses, because dimensional radius is not something he told anybody else he was researching.

After a moment's thought, he calls the number listed at the bottom of the email to confirm, question, and perhaps to rub in the mistake – no, Hermann is not always a *nice* person, and these things matter.

He is also looking forward to conversing. There are few minds he is interested in. Professional curiosity, not *nerves*. He understands that Dr Geiszler is also German, but based in the US. What will his accent be—

The idiot who answers the other end of the phone tells him that Dr Geiszler has already been moved to Lima. That this was the number for his previous residence.

He hasn't updated his email signature yet.

Hermann sighs, deeply.

It takes him 25 minutes to track the man down to the correct extension number in Lima. The phone is answered with a fumbling noise, a burst of static, the sudden drop in volume of some extremely loud music in the background that he vaguely recognises from his last trip to America, and then a surprisingly shrill, "Hello?!"

He clears his throat. "Dr. Geiszler?"

“...Yeah?”

“This is— this is Dr. Gottlieb. You emailed me.”

“...Did I? Wait, shit, I did! Dr. Gottlieb!” There is more fumbling, a crack and then the voice comes through a lot clearer, and closer. More intimate. Hermann sits up, straighter. “Hello, hi! Sorry, I’m...I forgot there was a phone to be honest, I have never been called on this number before. Actually, how did you get it? *I* don’t even know what it is.”

“I,” Hermann says, stupidly. He wasn’t expecting that many words, so quickly. “...A process of elimination. And some coercion.” He may have pulled rank. His *own* rank. He’s never used anyone’s name but his own, thank you.

Dr. Geiszler laughs. “Nice. Very James Bond.” He continues straight on talking before Hermann can even begin to *think* of an appropriate response for that. “I mean! Very cool. Very cool. Uh, so, thanks for getting in touch. Um. Wie geht es Ihnen?”

“Yah— yes, I’m fine, thank you.” He doesn’t have a lot of time before he needs to leave for his flight, and he is not accustomed to speaking German in front of his current colleagues. He is always careful with doing so, in fact. In all situations. Old habits, a painful death. He makes to continue, then remembers his manners. “I— You, as well?”

Dr. Geiszler chuckles, after a moment. “Yeah, dude, danke. Mir geht es gut. Actually I’m pretty freaking excited to be honest, your mind is rad. When do you get here, what are you working on now, any advances on calculating the Breach location?”

“Some – How did you know that?!” His current area of focus is *supposed* to be classified. He glares over his shoulder at the rest of his previous team; they are carefully not listening.

Dr. Geiszler’s chuckle comes down the phone again, high and shrill. “We work for the same people now? Plus. Logically thinking ahead from what you were last publishing results on, I figured what you’d be heading to next...” He leaves the connection unsaid. He doesn’t need to.

Impressive.

“Of course.” Hermann clears his throat again.

“So! You got data for me?”

“Yes, however, I’m unsure what you are hoping for as I arrive tomorrow. Were you looking for a preliminary outline before seeing me in person, or was it simply a...head’s up, as it were, as to what you would like to begin once I am there?”

On the other end Dr. Geiszler breathes in, then out once. “Both, actually. If you can give me a few averages, I can start off my end here and then we can—” He snorts softly, which comes down the line as static. “Meet in the middle, *as it were*.”

Hermann narrows his eyes. He is being mocked, he thinks. He does not wish to jump to conclusions without more data, though. “...Certainly. However the averages are complex, and I need some clarification. The co-ordinates you sent were wrong.”

There is a pause before Dr. Geiszler answers. “...Yeeeah, I type super fast when I email, especially jet-lagged at 4am. Shit happens, typos happen.” He pauses again. Hermann mentally stops, thinks. Was he too rude? It was nothing but truth. Fact. Perhaps he’d misconstrued— “I didn’t, uh. I’m sure your giant brain worked out what I meant.”

Geiszler laughs, Hermann doesn't. He's gotten lost somewhere. Was that— a compliment?

"Yes." *Scheiße*. Think quickly. Conversation is so *frustrating*. "I— I wonder, have you made any advances in your assessment of metabolic effects of kaiju blue?"

"Loads – but the big thing is the correlation between bone and metal, you gotta see this stuff. My research is *amazing*."

"I have no doubt."

Pause.

"...Was that sarcasm, man?"

"No! No, I'm. Looking forward to getting to work with you." He *is*. He's known that for a while, and he wants to get started. They have *so much* to do. "I. Have been for some time."

"Oh." Geiszler clears his throat again, breathes, then his words rush and tumble at Hermann.

"Okay— sorry, sorry I'm still jet-lagged here. Really don't think it's gonna be good for me to argue with you whilst I'm distracted. Though—" His voice changes again, closer to the phone once again. "I'll still win even then, for sure."

Hermann licks his lips. "I wouldn't count on it. Your mistakes are easy to spot."

Geiszler laughs. "Well you *do* seem to enjoy pointing out flaws in stuff I've done."

He bristles. If that was an attempt at clearing the air, it failed. "I point out facts, only. I would have thought someone with your...varied academic experience would be used to criticism."

Geiszler snorts. "Hoo, yep, that's why I went for six doctorates, I'm just a *glutton* for punishment."

"...Are you trying to out-*qualify* me?"

A sound of shock. "*What*— No! No." Geiszler coughs. "I'm not. How could I?"

Pause.

Pause.

"...True."

He gives a short bark of laughter again. "Oookay, well. I'm sure we're both extremely educated and impressive. You can show me your credentials when you arrive if you feel the need."

Pause.

"That, sounded weird, I meant—"

"Do you have a compulsive need to mention your doctorates in every conversation we have?"

Hermann ought to stop talking, but now his hackles are up. He doesn't entirely know what just— it felt like flirtation, or mockery. Flirtation feels sticky in his throat and the rest, well, Vanessa and his siblings are the only person he feels at all comfortable around with any sort of *teasing* and he doesn't know Geiszler beyond digits and letters. This feels horribly familiar. Hermann has *nothing* that he needs to prove to anybody, to his mind, and he is tired of repeating that fact to himself, to Father, to— Geiszler is, is messing with him. Definitely. "Or, is this for my benefit only?"

“This is our *first* conversation.” Geiszler’s voice has changed. Still high but with a dirty, rough edge. Like a sawdrill. It drops into Hermann’s stomach. His thoughts buzz.

“Technically, at best. We *have* conversed via the internet. Though I agree that your typing barely counts as dialogue.”

Something creaks. Possibly the phone, in Geiszler’s hand. “Do you seriously want to have a talk about the linguistic value of the internet and typing as a reflection of personality, Dr Gottlieb?” Geiszler hisses.

“Absolutely not. Anywhere that pictures of cats can be used as a viable response to conversation doesn’t bear much scrutiny.”

“Oh my— Fuck!” Geiszler starts laughing, and laughing, ending with some sort of guttural noise. “You’re the most arrogant person I have ever met, and I haven’t even *met* you.”

“Me?!” Hermann’s voice disappears into a range he hasn’t used for a while. One of his ex-colleagues glances over and Hermann turns viciously aside, leaning against the table, leaning over the phone.

“Never mind my questions, I will send over the outline for you now, though I doubt you will understand a thing until I get there and explain it tomorrow. Or. Wednesday.” He rubs the centre of his forehead. Suddenly, he has a headache.

“Great.” More rustling. “And I have nothing to add to that except ‘LOL’, ‘cat’ and ‘dot com’. Safe flight!” Geiszler barks.

Then he hangs up.

Chapter End Notes

German Translations:

entschuldigen Sie bitte - I beg your pardon

Wie geht es Ihnen - How are you?

Danke - Thanks

Mir geht es gut - I'm good

Scheiße - Shit!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Newton was a difficult kid. Sweet, but frenetic.

He crawls at 5 months, walks by 11. He falls over a lot, dribbles on everything, gets his teeth early, gets *everywhere*, but he sleeps through 10 hours a night from the age of 4 months. Like he's exhausted himself out enough in the day that his body just takes over to shut him up.

His parents are desperately grateful, and so, so in love with him.

They take him to his first gig when he is a baby, not that he can recall it - the first one he *does* is in a basement jazz club. He is 2, but he remembers, he *does*; swinging his feet back again and again against the seat, and having to sit so far forwards to hold his cup that he was nearly chinning himself on the edge of the table. The sticky juice on his fingertips, the line of evening light at the top of the blacked-out windows, and his dad's trumpet playing. Mom humming next to him, her hand on his lower back so that he was safe.

His first word is in German (well sort of, *Papa*), his second, the next day, is half a line sung in English from a song his mom has had stuck in her head for a few weeks (--*roova's intha hart*). Mom blinks down at him, 100% completely astonished, shocked into stillness whilst scribbling notes on her sheet music with her guitar next to her, Newt on her knee. He still totally loves that big *O* face, and she still totally makes it.

His parents move through super proud to earnest to baffled. He makes them *laugh*, though. He goes through a phase of biting their fingers, their furniture, their dog. There is a picture of him asleep in a kick drum in the back of a van when he is 3. Mom has it framed at home, next to one from his first graduation when he was 13. Kindergarten is a blast, a fond collection of recollections even when he is an adult, all colour and shape and the taste of paint and cookies. Elementary is... interesting.

He is IQ tested when he is 5 and off the charts - as in, charts that he would fit on almost don't exist. His parents decide to move him to the US, because there are better opportunities there, and sure, mom misses her family, no lie. Berlin is changing fast, but the US has brighter lights, and his grandparents offer to help pay for his education. He's their only grandchild, and they want to do whatever they can. He has a private tutor from the time he is 6 and he takes science, mathematics, and history exams for school early. Gunter asks after him whenever he phones, calls him *der kleene Staubsauger*, the tiny Hoover, because he absorbs information all in a rush, incredibly fast, eats it up and then gets giddy off it. A bit like he'd breathed it all in too fast and needs a paper bag. Rushing out the knowledge later with genuine glee, replaying it, playing about with it. Like inhaling helium. Gunter and his wife can't come over to visit until he is 8, when they all go out to a TGI Fridays and Newt pops half the balloons on their table with Papa and Gunter, inhales the rest, and turns himself silly with the gas and laughing so hard. This could be an explanation for the somewhat scratchy voice he ends up with after puberty, but probably not.

His cousin, Hanna, is seven years younger than him and that first time he holds her, everyone stands around capturing the moment with cameras but poised like *predators*, ready to spring just in case— but he holds her careful, and tight. Wide eyed. He would *never*—

He wants to know everything. This isn't an exaggeration, it's a failure of semantics and language.

The words are not true *enough* because, why is abstract art okay but he gets marked down for run-on sentences? Has anyone ever used algebra in disguise as a code? Maybe it's a code? In how many chemical, specific ways is he totally unique on Earth? How can we possibly *not* know why the dinosaurs died yet, that is *stupid*—? Can I be a manga artist if I don't know Japanese – *I should definitely learn Japanese*—

He gets glasses at 10. He reads everything he can get his hands on, usually leaving it with a number of unidentifiable fingerprint stains all over it. Guidebooks, contracts, textbooks, *A Brief History...* That one his godfather buys him when he is 11 as a joke, and then really, really regrets it. He touches *everything*, particularly what he is told not to. His parents stopped taking him to art galleries once he was old enough to run off on his own, then give up and let him go alone.

King Kong is his favourite movie, until he sees Jason and the Argonauts, until he sees Jurassic Park 12 times in the cinema, until he gets a copy of Godzilla... His life is *hard*, dude. Gunter teaches him electronics over a summer visit, quickly, because the classes at school are too slow for him and his dad had therefore called his brother to ask with a tone of desperation unfamiliar in such a normally relaxed man. Newt destroys the video player when he gets back, but fixes the dodgy amp mom's been meaning to sell for years, and only burns three fingers!

He has a mental body map of facts which he calls his *Corpus Geiszlum*: how many bones are in which part of his skeleton, how many muscles, how many strands and prefixes to his DNA, and he can recite the formula by heart. His capacity for remembering melody is matched only by his capacity to forget what time he is supposed to be home after school. Lessons. None of the academic institutions he visits bother making him take mandatory computing classes, ever, because he has been dismantling those machines since Acorn Archimedes was a thing.

When he starts at college, then at MIT, he makes friends easily but not many of them stick around long except for a few choice characters. Quite frankly he scares the shit out of most of his peers, and he is always younger than everyone else in his years of study, by a terrible, impressive margin. Boys look down on him, girls think he's sweet until he beats them at every test, and then it turns vicious.

His glasses get broken a lot. Black plastic frames are easy to fix with gaffer tape, or a soldering iron and some melted plastic from whatever he can find at home to match, so his parents don't notice. He could get new ones but they are a classic look, okay. He is ahead of his time, people will catch onto this.

Thank *fuck* he can play guitar (and piano, but that's too retro) or no-one would ever have invited him to any parties. Luckily, he is a rock-star, and a subtle one – because how he gets in *anywhere* with his babyface is an enduring mystery of the universe. When the amount of hair on his body triples – yeah, *biology* – he is already one doctorate down so he thinks, fuck it, and has a fantastic moustache for a while there.

He shoves a 2nd year aside from a 'dj table' (the back of the sofa) at one party when he is 15 because he just cannot bear it anymore, syncs Outkast perfectly into The Chemical Brothers, and everyone loses their *shit* - until he tries to explain *why* that was so much better than the previous crappy discord and then there are groans, laughter, and a big – *big* - third year throws an arm around his shoulders and noogies him until he screeches and stops talking.

He gets drunk on beer the German half of him can barely taste, and the sickly-sweet girly drinks that the American half of him likes more. He can bounce off the walls, literally. University analysts get dangerously close to recommending he see a therapist. He headbutts a table once and apparently that makes him more endearing? He takes poppers a few times and *doesn't feel any*

different. He bites his nails, habitually, until he lets Hanna paint them glittergold one summer when he visits his family in Berlin and they look too good to ruin. She is 11, he is 18, and he might have two and a half doctorates now but he would do anything she said, okay, anything. She is the best.

Newt is short but he is pretty, and *smart*, but he has to wait a long, long time to get any action. First because he is so much younger than anyone he has lessons with during his first MIT years, and then because he is just known as that record-breaking kid at MIT, even when he is 18 - and then because he is a teacher as well, so it's kinda inappropriate or weird. Or something. Fuck his life. He somehow misses the golden months inbetween those timeframes when he could have been On That. His golden age. Probably because he is splitting his time between frenzied research and playing *World of Warcraft* when his eyes start to blur. Eventually, he (mostly) loses his virginity when he has just turned 19, in a freezing cold hostel bathroom in Budapest at 3 in the afternoon, with a soft-lipped girl called Amira whose surname he never learns. She digs her fingertips into his thighs, urging him, and he comes in about 10 seconds in wonderful shock.

He never feels the same way about bathtubs ever, ever again.

Aaaand he goes a little crazy after that, messily blowing his TA Steve Aida in his dorm room at MIT two days later like he's wanted to for a *long* long couple of terms. Spit, salt, *heat*, tongue — He likes the smell of condoms, and sweat, he is more flexible than he thought he could physically and realistically be after years of studying – good thing he leapt about at all of those gigs or he couldn't have jerked and groaned and flexed back up against Jake Crawford the first time he gets fucked, pushing back onto him, onto the hard stretch inside him holy *shit*, he whines, babbles, he wants more, he has been missing *out*.

When he thinks of guitar riffs and spread thighs, later, he really *gets something about himself* for the first time. The first time he pushes into a guy (Matt, barman, studying Lit., great tats) is a revelation on a deep, reverberating scale. It is in no way a surprise to himself that he loves going down and wet on a girl, though, or that he loves teeth, throats, especially with stubble, or when he finds out how much he enjoys pressing his fingertips into his own hickies later. Really, he could have predicted that. That lovely flare of fascination in his belly... And it is great, great, fucking great. He is on fire. He has a thing about hands. He is the son of musicians, okay, what is he supposed to do with that? Clever, gifted fingers = a giddy Geiszler. Particularly if they slide *deep* in his hair—

He has fucking *awesome* hair.

'Newton Geiszler'? His application reports of years of academia sum him up in various ways. 'Gifted but a little too morbid', 'extremely fascinated by everything'. Frantic, furious, funny. *Keen*, not entirely re-assuring. Extraordinary. Borderline. The potential must, must be explored.

He figures that's a pretty good approximation of self.

When an alien monster comes out of the ocean he is 23, standing barefoot in his tiny kitchen in his flat in Massachusetts, about to eat breakfast before a day of teaching. He has a bowl of cereal in his hand and the milk in the other, but he doesn't ever actually mix the two things, just holds them separately for 10 minutes whilst he stares open-mouthed at the TV on the counter. The fingers on his right hand go numb and cold from the milk, his hands shake, the little Frankenberries in his bowl dancing at him - he always stocks up enough over Hallowe'en that he can keep eating them for most of the months after, but this was his last bowl, fuck, and he never eats it. In the background his phone rings and rings – his parents, probably. At some point he realises that he has sat down hard on the floor, then gets up and rushes at the TV, holding both sides of it to *lean in*—

Something that should not exist passes through metal and buildings like butter, and Newt's world

jumps into a whole new specialty subject, a whole new playing field, what feels like a whole new dimension. The world tilts. Tip, slip, and Newt freefalls, letting go with a terrified, fantastic instinctual dive, the bottom of his stomach falling out in awe and fear, and he is totally unable to catch his breath for about 4 days.

He doesn't stop for the next 9 years, really.

Okay, so Newt often sends emails and then forgets them as soon as he has, until the responses come in. He is perfectly fucking accurate in his research and publications, but what's a few typos on an email, okay, fuck. Apparently it's a big problem for Gottlieb, who it turns out types a mile a minute but never makes a single typo, because the email had arrived 3 minutes after Newt abruptly ended their 'conversation' and it was perfect, and that is fucking *alien* in a way not even kaiju can match.

Newt would have had no problem admitting that he had deep, passionate, filthy feelings about Dr Gottlieb's brain before meeting him, sure. And he's not even really into math. He also felt – feels – that way a little about Caitlin Lightcap, but who doesn't. Point being, now he's actually talked to the man? Ha. Idea gone, destroyed, stamped on repeatedly.

“Hey, has Dr Gottlieb arrived yet?” Newt asks Joe the second the elevator doors open and he tumbles out into the corridor and spots him, 7am on Wednesday morning.

Joe, a huge baguette in his mouth and his hands full of papers, pauses and takes the food out, chewing quickly so that he can answer.

“Yeah, I— I met him on my way in,” he replies, falling into step with Newt when he starts hurrying towards the lab, fighting his way out of his jacket with purpose. Joe looks at him sideways. “I, uh, haven't actually been *inside* the lab yet...”

“Relax, dude.” Newt waves a hand. “Not checking up. I just wanna know so I am ready to *punch his face in*. Or maybe—” Newt stops as he rounds the corner to their lab, wondering.

Joe bumps into him, and Newt is mentally pleased that a) his short legs are going quick enough to make Mackie's work that hard, and b) he has had this brilliant idea. He is full of ideas this morning. He is full of purpose, of energy, of buzzing anticipation and anger and a little, slow curl of giddy, strangely appealing lust-rage, hot in his blood. He isn't sure. *What*. Gottlieb is a horrible weirdo. With a great voice. Newt blames his cousin for this, definitely, for her incessantly watching reruns of all those 90s BBC period dramas the last summers he was visiting Gunter, and even though they had terrible German dubbing most of the time *something* must have gotten across and made him susceptible to the British accent because, fuck.

Newton hates Hana. He hates Gottlieb. He also put his best pants on this morning?

“*Yeaahhhh*,” he says, pleased with the idea he has just formed. “I'm gonna kick him. I'm gonna kick him in the fucking shins so that he can tell me I am childish and *then* hit him in the face for that.” He starts moving again.

“Woah.” Joe sounds weird, though.

Newton stops before hitting the door button for the lab and looks at him.

“What?”

“Just. Dude, he’s super snippy, I get the face thing, but the shins is a low blow.”

“What?” What? A tech passing in a rush knocks Newton’s shoulder, and tutts at him. Newt ignores it. Huh? “Wait, what— why?”

The lab door opens with a *whoosh* and Soo-jin, their top bioanalyst, comes out with an armful of folders. She nearly walks straight into him and has to stop an inch from them, startled.

“What are—oh! Yes! I need you.” She hefts the papers higher in her arms so that she can free a hand and grabs Joe by the sleeve, and then turns, walking off down the corridor and tugging him after her. It’s hilarious because she is *tiny*, but who cares because over her shoulder Newton can see someone new. Attention, focus, zoom.

Correction, someone who is not new. All circumstantial and logical evidence points to: Hermann Gottlieb.

The man is standing in front of a blackboard Newton doesn’t remember being there yesterday – most people use *whiteboards*, you know – and copying equations from a page in his hand. Big hands. Newton’s mind catalogues, observes, stutters.

He has what looks from the back like an oddly grown out techpunk haircut, part *shaven?* with odd licks of dark brown down his neck. Cream grandad shirt, shoulderblades moving under it, sleeves buttoned tightly at the wrist, long arms, long, long legs. Newt’s libido jumps into his throat. And—he’s holding a cane, leaning on it with one hand. Newton’s libido doesn’t give a shit, when does it, it takes in the information and is more than willing to work with that, hypotheses spiralling that — but his sense of moral propriety metaphorically slaps him upside the head.

He steps back and sideways, turning out of view of the doorway.

“I am an asshole,” he says, as his back hits the wall. A couple of engineers glance at him as they pass, bemused. Further down the corridor, Joe snorts loudly. Then Newton blinks. No, *fuck no* I’m not, he thinks, I’m only an asshole if I think it makes any difference to my totally justified desire to punch him and it does not in any way because that guy is a *bitch*, and I am a genius, and I want to ask him about his projections.

He snarls. Adjusts his shirt. Strides in.

Gottlieb is just lifting his chin and pursing his lips at the work he’s done. Across the room, lovely Agnieszka, the nuclear chemist from Krakow, waves at Newton with her gloves on.

“Hello, Newton!” She looks super relieved to see him.

Newt throws her a wide smile, but turns, because Gottlieb turns to face him too.

“Yo, Dr. Gottlieb,” he says, because he can.

“...Dr. Geiszler.”

Gottlieb has pinched cheekbones, pale skin, big eyes. His face looks young, his expression anciently disapproving. He has great eyebrows. Great bone structure. Long throat. Stupid buttoned collar. Unreadable expression. He glances down Newt’s body and back up, stands a little taller, fingers curling on his cane.

Newt raises his eyebrows, opening his arms wide.

Gottlieb straightens, lifts his chin and narrows his eyes.

Agnieszka coughs, very carefully and quietly, into her sleeve.

“Awesome!” Newt says, and spins away.

He has read the phrase *whip-thin* in trashy airport novels before but never actually thought about applying it to a genuine, actual human person. Not until now. The word flashes through his mind like a neon light as he angrily moves some stuff around on his desk and puts his gloves on and drags over his current sample, and feels a lightning, *humming* line of distaste and total attention between him and the relative stranger at this back, both of them not looking at each other across the room. He can *feel* them not looking at each other.

He uses the mirror above the sink to check after 6 minutes, and Dr. Gottlieb (Jr) is turned aside, flicking through a folder at what he has claimed as his desk, his profile sharp and pointed, before he turns, takes a deep breath in and sets to work on his board.

14 minutes later, Newt scrubs the word from his vocabulary. He'd turned carefully, looking over his shoulder with so much subtlety- he is the *king* of subtle – that he basically looked out from *underneath* his own glasses, to see Gottlieb folding his cuffs over. Just once, nothing exciting, brain, nothing underneath but his wrists. Then he reaches up with the chalk and his shirt pulls across the back of his shoulders, and no, he's not thin, he's *slender*, and that's totally different, a different span and give. *Tensile strength*. A biologist really should have known not to overlook—and then Newt scrubs his brain a little, scrubs at an inch in his nose with his wrist so it doesn't touch the plastic of his gloves when Gottlieb flicks a glance over at him, turning his observation into nothing but a totally explainable skin and motor impulse, then turns back to the sample in front of him and scrubs away the word and the thought that he had just found Gottlieb *attractive*, already, again, *No*.

Now that he knows him, Newt needs to remember that this is physically and mentally Not Right.

Hermann undertook a rudimentary – other people would call it detailed, but other people are *not in the Gottlieb family* – study of all sciences. Of course. He would still not call himself a biologist, though. Not in any *true* sense.

One does not need certified expertise or six bloody doctorates, however, to see that Dr Newton Geiszler is a perfect example of nature *having a conniption fit*.

Geiszler is everything that Hermann abhors. He is unpredictability, variation, vanity and messy... messiness - yet he doesn't even have the decency to be definitively chaotic, and instead has this staggering intellect, intuitive process and the wide knowledge to back it up. His writing style is insane but his research faultlessly referenced and innovative, if *inexplicably* centred on things Hermann does not really want to think about, at times.

He has a couple of tattoos of some of the first kaiju that were seen, curling on his forearm and apparently further up to his bicep, in vibrant colours and roulette curves that draw the eye - and a fair amount of distaste from a lot of people. He will go on to add more, to etch in new ones, Hermann is sure. He can see this coming, just as he can see more kaiju coming.

He feels...uncomfortable, about them, and also looks at them a lot. Geiszler is openly fascinated by the kaiju, and the sentiment that drove him to hammer it under his skin is— well, Hermann can understand it, perhaps, the urge to note down the inspiration, to capture the shape of what drives you on, but he finds it distastefully obvious, too. Heart on your sleeve indeed, if that heart is forty times larger than a human's and acidic, alien. It is abstractly brave, but probably stupid. Not to mention... Fine, yes, there is something in the patterns on his skin that Hermann finds quietly, hummily pleasing, just aesthetically, or *synesthetically*, perhaps - but then he remembers that the reality is so much worse, so much more brutal, and Geiszler should know better. Why doesn't he, he's cut bits of them *open*?

He is...unusual.

He listens to music at *at least* a decibel higher than he should, medically, and after three weeks Hermann is convinced that the man can and will listen to anything. He has Hermann's jaeger code screensaver on his personal laptop, the one covered in stickers. He... He has *stubble*.

The first four days between he and the little nuisance, as he takes to calling him, are not completely silent; they may not have spoken in person, but they exchange a number of quickfire emails.

Varying conversation includes:

- Detailed discussion of his projections, the fictional equation at the centre of his predictive model, and genetic mutability
- Lamentations that there is not yet a programme that can fully realise what he can imagine because his mind is awesome but he can't describe it totally, but a promise to build his own and then fucking rub it in his face
- *Deep gratitude* that there is not yet a programme that could fully realise what horrors the other could imagine
- Gleefully given information on the fact that btw he will probably need to get his keycard re-programmed correctly 'cause everyone's has been getting stuck on the 6th floor, good luck with that, I hope you run out of air in there
- Clarification of the fact that Hermann has already experienced this and re-programmed the lift, and *his own card*
- 11 ignored requests to turn the music down
- 10 ignored, flagged requests to get a personality
- Discussion of who is better at German - with grammatical pointers and then a link to a *Wikipedia* page
- 32 pictures of cats with messages in white capital letters, and one eventual .gif of a black hole – which was a joke that Hermann is not sure Geiszler understood, that it was *supposed to be him*, sucking all logical order and matter out of the world...

On the fifth working day – technically Sunday but the PPDC Lima knows no weekend schedule, really – one of the pilots and military types, Stacker Pentecost, comes in to assess their progress and officially welcome Hermann.

It's a little late, but Hermann is not offended. The frenetic pace of building the first Jaegers allows for slippage.

He salutes Pentecost. Geiszler snorts behind him and Hermann whirls, mind white, raging. He can think of nothing to do for a whole second but eventually this: he flips two savage fingers in Geiszler's direction.

Geiszler looks completely shocked, mouth open.

So does Pentecost.

“My apologies,” Hermann says smoothly, and gestures to his desk, inviting Pentecost over.

The next day, Geiszler walks over whilst he is sitting at his desk, his reading lamp on, his eyes flying over a paper sheet that he is extrapolating ideas on. It is a version of his predictive model, drawn out to help him think, but he has done it in code. There is just he and Geiszler working at that moment, but he does not wish to explain it to anyone yet. He isn't ready. He doesn't have enough data.

He jumps, startled, when Geiszler coughs and is *there*, turning to lean against the edge of Hermann's desk and cross his legs at the ankles.

“Sooooo.”

“...What?” Hermann doesn't have his cane today, not needing it, his leg feeling good, and this is unfortunate as normally it would be leaning against the desk here and therefore would have stopped Geiszler from perching on his space. The urge to kick his boots straight is strong.

Geiszler frowns, leaning over to glance at the pages in front of Herman, but he moves back when Hermann makes an aborted movement to cover it. “I— dude, I won't *steal* it.”

Hermann stops himself fidgeting, looks down his nose at Geiszler. “I'm sure you've stolen plenty enough things in your time.”

“Only condoms and jelly beans.”

He is laughing before he can stop himself. Just once, snorting, his mouth curving up, his chin dropping to his chest. He lets his eyelids close for a second, equal parts ashamed and amused, and then sighs. When he looks sideways at Geiszler, Geiszler is grinning widely. Conspiratorially. His eyes are all scrunched up under his glasses, openly pleased.

“Oh I got you,” he says. “I completely got you, I see this now.” He folds his arms across his chest but points at Hermann. “*You* have a *soul*.”

Hermann sighs again, cracks his fingers, decides he never wishes to probe the truth of what Geiszler told him re: larceny, and spins in his chair to face him fully.

“Fine.” He puts his hands in his lap, flat on his own thighs. “What can I help you with?”

They go from silence to frenzied discussion, to furiously diagramming, to finishing each other's sentences, to interrupting each other, to outdoing each other, to outright shouting across the lab, in about four hours. Hermann shouts in German before he realises that he is doing it, shocking himself to silence, but Geiszler just screams back with his ridiculous Berliner accent, and Hermann snorts and shoots him down, and it stays that way for months. It looks set to remain that way for all foreseeable future.

Hermann has never hated anyone in this manner before. He hates that Geiszler cannot be plotted from one day to the next – one moment studious, the next doodling on his own arms, the next carefully guiding a tech through the process of distilling kaiju blue, overseeing everything with his arms folded and keeping a careful, respectful, encouraging distance and a very observant eye. Hermann can see why he taught at MIT for so long. He realises that he respects the man.

It is awful.

At least, after weeks of working there, he begins to see that Geiszler *is* predictable; he wears the same basic clothing week to week. Dark jeans that are too tight, trousers usually ripped at the knees – Hermann has become far too familiar with his *knees* for his own liking – and his shirt sleeves rolled up. His lab coat is rarely buttoned properly and he wears it over t-shirts with holes in the hem and collar. Hermann starts mentally making wagers and predictive models based on which shirt it will be on what day, which ridiculously skinny tie. It is an exercise for his mind. A moronic break. The genius equivalent of watching cartoons.

Geiszler is unacceptable. He eats *everything* in the shared fridge and pretends that he didn't see the labels. Perhaps he didn't. He is blind to many, many things. Common decorum. A razor. But he learns how to make Hermann's tea (steeped for 3.2 minutes) perfectly, just plopping a mug down on Hermann's desk at 3am one morning along with a coffee for Soo-jin and a Red Bull for himself, then wandering away, whistling something Hermann doesn't recognise but can see and hear is annoyingly in tune, if appalling. The perfect, recognisable shade of deep walnut coloured tea in the mug sends Hermann into twisting, untraceable feelings that include *deeply appreciative* and *gobsmacked* and *Oh Scheiße, you underestimated him again*.

When Geiszler is focussed on his work, it's as though he isn't there. This is the worst thing. He goes into some abstract. Some place of pure thought and knowledge. Hermann has seen him do it, bent over his work station, over samples, over a screen. The end of their fifth day working together, the first day they actually spoke, before the *disaster* that became, he'd gone to call goodbye as he left the lab and noticed Geiszler, leaning into a computer screen with his glasses halfway down his nose and his hands paused over the keyboard. His eyes focused, his mouth gone soft.

It felt so intimate Hermann had to look away.

That must be what he looks like, when he does it. He's never seen himself - he's never seen anyone else be able to do that except himself, before. He knows what that place looks like. The shape of the numbers there, the colours. The connections.

Hermann has never *shouted at anyone like this before*, and he is convinced that he never will again.

Chapter End Notes

My new working title for this is 'The Hot Mess'.

Chapter 3

9 months into Lima, Newt has to go and intercept some soldiers coming from a kaiju death site, so that he can get some new samples, with very little notice. Notice in the K-Science department is a phone call at 4am with a few barked instructions - after which he leaps out of bed, startled, buzzing, smacks his shin so hard into his dresser that it bleeds and swears in German under his breath the whole time as he hops about, throwing his stuff together in a hurry.

He can understand why a lot of the research teams go for rooms in the Shatterdome, rather than rooming elsewhere like he does, in a flat 20 minutes away. It's quickly becoming really, really tempting.

He gets in early. Gottlieb comes in soon after, and pointedly watches him double-check paperwork, flying around the lab, hyped up and focussed at the same time. When a tannoy announcement calls his name, he washes his hands, hefts his bag across his body and goes to wave, but Gottlieb speaks up.

"I'll come to the pad with you," he says, swinging himself up out of his chair and onto his feet.

Newt frowns, then shrugs, and adjusts the way he's standing so that he can jiggle his leg excitedly as Gottlieb gets his cane. "Cool, fine."

Gottlieb is slow today; his knee/thigh? must be bad. Newt's not plotting this or anything, he just notices. He matches pace with Gottlieb as they walk, assuming this is on his way out of the building or something. The guy has his own mysterious reasons for things and he has learned not to ask or risk lectures - endless, endless *lectures*... Gottlieb has also picked up a bag, which is unusual for him, pulling it high up on one shoulder, so he must be going somewhere.

His badge is pinned to the front of his jacket today, hooked moronically slap-bang in the middle of the tweed right over his heart - his empty, dried up heart, *snerk* - whilst Newt's is on his belt. His own bag is mostly full of metallic instruments and jars of chemicals, which is exactly the kind of thing his friends' moms feared he carried around as a child. If he'd gotten stopped by police on his way into work with this today then hoo *boy*, the jail time he would be serving now.

He wonders for a second if it would be one of their bosses from the PPDC, or Gottlieb, that would come and bail him out?

Probably neither.

In the months that have passed, though, they have found a...rhythm. Something like this as they tramp along the metal corridors, weaving around other people, stopping, starting, glancing at each other in mutual exasperation at how busy it always is, or Newt hopping around someone and glancing back to see Gottlieb's lips pursed at him in judgement. It is a weird rhythm, off-tempo, but Newt is into it. They're like... They're like scratchy, *dirty* house. *Rrr*. Gottlieb makes him screech with anger, yeah, but it's so damn *satisfying*, like getting at a deep, deep itch. And the work they do, man - their findings, their methods might clash but this can't be ignored. You cannot physically ignore them. Him. Newt tried once and Hermann threw an eraser at his head.

It's great. It really *is*. Yeah, you can like a guy's brain, and conceptually think he has great hands and long legs and...potential, but Newt knew deep in his bones by the end of their first week that Hermann Gottlieb is the worst person on the planet, on any planet in the known universe, and he can deal with that. He can honestly say he also stopped finding him attractive 32 seconds after

meeting him, and that is truly *special*, because Newt generally likes. Uh. *Everything*.

“Sat.call me as soon as you have the proportions,” Gottlieb reminds him as they approach outside, the heavy rolls of heat coming in through the open door.

Newt thinks, *oh*, and rolls his eyes. “Gottlieb come *on*, we’ve had this discussion already - there’s no signal on the helicopter, remember. I thought you *knew stuff* about flying machines.”

Gottlieb looks bitchy, then shifty, stopping in the doorway and waiting for a pilot to walk past them before he swivels his gaze back to Newt. “Yes, well, I know many things.” He pauses, then unhooks the bag from his shoulder with his thumb and passes it to Newt. “I...fiddled with your tablet a little.”

Newt, already taking the bag, recognises the precise, familiar weight in it immediately and blanches. “You. You *violated* Godzilla?”

Gottlieb’s mouth purses as he stares at Newt for a second. “You named your tablet Godzilla.”

“He may be small compared to kaiju but he’s mighty enough to take them on— which is *not* the point right now, stop changing the subject—” He waves that aside, possibly flailing, because *hey*, “—Are you telling me you *went inside him*?”

Gottlieb makes an uncomfortable sound, adjusting how he is standing, leaning on his cane. “I merely made some *minor* adjustments to—”

“Because, he only really likes being touched by one guy, buddy, and that is definitely not—

“—so you really ought to be grateful, *and* it will mean I get my—”

“—great and all, if kinda selfishly driven, but we’ve been through a *lot*—”

“Newton!” Gottlieb snaps.

The shock of hearing his own, full, *first* name makes Newt blink. Outside, an engine starts. Air refracts and wavers in the heat, rotor blades start spinning, and the world is *shocked*. Gottlieb looks as surprised as Newt feels.

Newt pushes his glasses up his nose, after a pause, just to check what he’s looking at. “Woah.” He has to say it louder, over the noise, and the craziness.

“I’m going to ignore everything that just happened.” The voice sounds very, super resolute on that, the expression says the opposite. Newt wants to grin but stops himself, hugging the bag with Godzilla in it close to his chest for a second to reassure himself, then slinging it over his shoulder.

“Okay you do that, I’m *not*,” he warns.

Gottlieb – Hermann, Hermann, la la fucking *la* – does that thing where all the parts of his face seem to want to do a different thing; smile, spit, and hiss. Newt *does* grin then. “Nope.” he adds. “Never.”

“Shut up.” Hermann points at the movement outside, but spins half on his feet and half on his cane as he does it – kinda cool, *dickhead* – and starts walking off back into the base, so the gesture gets thrown over his shoulder, like a comeback. “The helicopter is leaving,” he yells.

“Thanks *Hermann*!” Newt shouts, as loud as he can.

It is strange, and wonderful, to be working as part of such a great machine. He's been working on defeating the kaiju since 2013, of course, but now he is a different sort of cog, an integral piece.

The relative anonymity of it is reassuring, as Hermann always liked being left to do his work on his own, but he also knows that he is important – more than important. He is vital. He is a leading mind. He is one of a huge, pan-global number of people trying to save the world.

In his part of it, he uses one corner of the lab and writes his equations, thinks in digital code, in probabilities, and sketches out the future, whilst Newton - privately, he's given up and calls him Newton in his mind, but luckily has managed to only say it 2.5 times aloud, and the .5 is because the first wouldn't count for a study, being as it was *under duress*. Too variable - sits in the other. There, he traces bone particles and veins and flesh, trying to find the practical, relatable underpinnings to it, and the rest of the team fills in the gaps that they cannot.

"Hey, clarify something for me," Newton asks.

It is Friday night and for once they are going to leave on time; most of them are going to a bar, but Hermann is gathering his things to go home. He pauses, stacking books, turning to Newton, where he is shutting down his laptop.

"Yes?"

"Your parents are both German?"

Hermann blinks. He glances around the lab. Everyone else is busy, half of the team having left already. "Ah, no." He straightens his back. "My mother is British. Essentially."

Newton props an elbow on his desk, his chin on his hand. "Essentially'? How does that work?"

"I should imagine someone in your field ought to have some idea," he replies, dry.

Newton rolls his eyes. "Yeah yeah, you know what I mean. Pretend you can converse like a normal person for once. Your mom..."

"Is Welsh." Not that you'd know it from her accent. She studied at Cambridge, like Hermann, except that she read Classics, which is a source of simultaneous deep pride, bemusement, and a little shame, to him, all fluctuating depending on his age, mood, and energy levels.

"What brought her to Bavaria?"

He has never been directly asked this much about it by anyone, but Vanessa. It is...interesting. Strange. "My grandfather came from there, before the war. She got a visit agreement to explore her roots."

"And met your dad, and stayed?"

"In a fairly small nutshell, yes."

"Cool." Newton stands up again, shutting his laptop lid. "Like me. Mom's from New York. My grandparents thought she was *crazy* to visit West Germany but she had this whole late hippy stage - *big* Kennedy freak, my mom - and wanted to go, fight with song... Stupid." He laughs, unselfconscious and fond. Hermann is fascinated by him, reeling off information like it's in fashion. "And then, boom!" He claps his hands together, his bracelets rattling. "Met my dad. Long-

distance crap until they could marry, wall comes down, I come out. Two halves, one unique whole.” He points at Hermann, then at himself. “Ditto.”

“Your grasp of genetics is stunning,” Hermann says, unsure what else to.

“Don’t get me started on genetics, dude, you will *regret* it, because you will not be able to keep up.”

He is tempted to come to the bar just to prove Newton wrong, but doesn’t.

They work in Lima for over a year. Ideas get developed, memos sent. Newt sends his findings off, reads the updates, oversees his team, and learns a lot from everyone.

4 more kaiju come, destroy and are destroyed, and Newt had long ago accepted that he needs to think bigger, so he plans for more tattoos, working on one cohesive piece with gaps left for those that will still appear. He has big, big plans. He’s not *looking forward* to it, okay, not exactly, he’s not looking forward to more death and destruction, but he also wants to *see*, he wants to know what else there could be - and he knows it’s coming because the kaiju haven’t stopped. Gottlieb’s got predictions, and he has physical, quickly decaying proof. He’s— not *okay* with it, of course, but he is...

Anticipating it. Excited? Preparing himself.

New Jaegers stretch their new metal limbs. Hermann – which he has been told on pain of...pain, that he is not allowed to call him, aloud, ever – and he work in companionable silence for an entire 30 minutes, one day. He synthesises an acid to break down kaiju bone more quickly and finds himself, often, trying to imagine what the Drift can possibly be like and whether he could ever do that. To let his thoughts out, unleashed? *With another person there?* He’s not sure. He’s not sure anyone else would really, really like him to do that, but the concept of it is amazing, *jesus*, the mere *concept* is delicious - it would taste like fucking raspberries, he’s convinced.

They are told that they will be moving to Tokyo. The original K-Science Lima team will be splitting and dividing like cells, scattering across the globe, but he and Hermann are going to the same place, with a good chunk of their guys.

He’s feeling good about it.

During their last week before moving, somebody manages to convince everyone to actually go outside for lunch. This is exciting news. The attack on Sydney last week has left everyone rattled, still. Newt’s *teeth* still ache thinking about it, the city, the new kaiju, the nuclear *detonation*— It’s a bit too fucking much, that it’s 2017 and they’re still using that. His arm stings, too, where he has new work: Yamarashi, a kaiju that was particularly fucking awful, enormous, and totally unprecedented and *mind-blowing*, recently added to his left forearm in the new style he has sketched out at home.

Outside, it’s hot. This is another one of his understatement, shit. It’s *hot*, but there’s shade in the courtyard.

Everyone sprawls out, but stays close to each other. Hermann is wearing a hideously patterned pink granddad sweater that Newt’s never seen before and he doesn’t take it off, seemingly unaffected, and it’s so damn *tempting*, but Newt decides to just... let it go, today.

Plus he's rocking his own leather jacket, so he can't complain.

They sit together, pressed in a close group on a wooden bench. Some of the others sit on the grass. Some even *lounge*, pretending like they feel at all unhurried. For a moment, it even feels that way, except that Newt hasn't slept more than a couple of hours each night since last week and Hermann's sitting stiffly on the edge of the bench with his back almost to Newt, his leg propped up on a plant pot, the knee obviously (to Newt) swollen. His other thigh almost touches Newt's. They've possibly, he suddenly realises this, that they've possibly never been physically closer, that a lot of his side is touching Hermann and Hermann doesn't seem to have noticed, or care, maybe, and suddenly that is a big deal. The sun is shining. They live in crazy days.

He finishes his chips, licking his fingers clean as he talks with Joe across the table for a bit. Hermann, in his peripheral vision, pushes the sleeves of his sweater up to his elbows before he reaches for his neatly made sandwich. Newt picks an apple next, gets an insane whim, and follows the insane whim; he buffs the apple clean on the back of Hermann's shoulder. He expects a shout but instead the other scientist looks at him sharply, then shoves him backwards half-off the bench.

Newt just about stops himself by grabbing the edge, his head tipping back as he laughs, his knees hitting the underside of the bench.

He nudges Hermann back with his elbow.

"You are a *child*," Hermann sighs.

Lucca, their new programmer from Rome, comes out last of the group. He stops on the grass, staring at them.

"We're all here." he says. "...I'm getting my camera. There should be scientific proof for future posterity!"

He jogs back indoors. Hermann watches him go, then shakes his head. "I suppose it is a scientific anomaly," he admits, picking his sandwich apart carefully.

"Yeah," Newt agrees. "Who knew you wouldn't burst into flames in the sun?"

When he's back, Lucca manoeuvres them all, grumbling, into a line along the wall. Newt hands Hermann his cane when he gets up and then gets into position; Gottlieb hops next to him, leaning back against the wall, and the rest of the team naturally move either side of them, falling in alongside. Soo-Jin smiles up at him, whilst Harold eyes Hermann carefully from the other side until Agnieszka pushes in between them. She and Gottlieb bonded over fusion during his first week there, and she practises her German with him. She never practises her German with *Newt*.

Lucca lifts his tablet –then drops it. "Wait - aren't you very hot?" he asks.

"No." Newt and Gottlieb both answer at the same time. They look at each other, sideways, whilst the others laugh. Newt half-grins, quick, definitely amused, and Hermann gives an elegant little shrug.

"I, uh, I meant you Dr Gottlieb, but I should say - Newton, *black leather*?" Lucca is *laughing at them*. "It is so warm!"

Newt turns away from Hermann, drawing the attention away. "Rock stars pay no mind to the sun, kid, the sun *pays mind to them*."

"Okay," Lucca says, and sets up the timer.

Hermann bitches endlessly when he sees the photo later, printed and pinned up on their board on the last day; no-one told him he had half of his collar tucked in, you imbeciles. As if that is the important thing.

“As if that could have *in any way* saved that sweater from hideousity,” Newt points out.

Hermann lids his eyes at Newt in anger. “That isn’t a word, and you look ridiculous in it as well.”

"Actually it *is* a word, bitch." And, *hey* - everything Gottlieb wears is old, worn through, untidy, and crumpled, and he bitches at *Newt* for how he dresses? Fuck that. And, actually, Newt looks great in that photo, but he hates it. He hates it. Hermann is *smiling* in it. It’s weird.

He has smile lines. He has really, really nice smile lines.

Newt *did not need to know this*.

The photo comes with them halfway across the world, packed in a box along with everything else on the board. Something else comes too - Newt had been gesturing with the apple he'd been eating when it was taken, in a sort of salute, and it becomes a running, gravitational, unintentional joke that follows him to Tokyo.

Whatever, he doesn’t let it rule him. A man can eat apples if he wants! And Tokyo is killer awesome and Newt is so distracted by everything brilliant there that he forgets to be confused by it. It took a battering by Onibaba but kept going, all the lights, buildings, people, history, tech... He *loves* it. His Japanese is shitty but he tries so hard, and so unstoppably – can’t be fazed, can’t be tamed, what a tune - that the local staff and engineers give up and indulge him.

Meanwhile Hermann does a lot of aborted, awkward bowing.

Newt rolls his eyes *constantly*.

Pentecost is there at first, and he’s adopted a kid at some point. Blink, huh. She's tiny, with huge, dark eyes, and she looks familiar for a while - until Newt gets it. *Oh*. Fuck. The backstory would have been obvious either way, but no-one says anything about it to her, most particularly not Newt, who is glad that he has a jacket on the first time he meets her, and then feels guilty, for himself, for her, fuck.

Pentecost goes to Alaska with his new daughter, and he and Hermann and their team settle into the new city.

The picture gets put up on the new board, but already the team shown is out of date. 3 of the people on it are in different countries. It becomes part of the wallpaper, part of the room, half hidden by sketches and bulletins and papers and research, snapshots of kaijus, keys for those who have a blank moment and forget the base line of the newest code they've all worked on after working too many long nights, a card from the body-sushi place from the corner where you can eat off naked women, passive-aggressive notes from Hermann telling people to wash their damn coffee mugs before they breed new species in there.

Over time, members of the team add to the picture. Someone draws a very florid moustache on the face of Joe. Agnieszka colours her top in a different colour and adds a PPDC flag. Someone else adds a penis to the wall behind, and other graffiti joins it later; names, dates. Newt adds tattoos to people that never had them, and cannot help doodling all over the wall – it is the Berliner in himself, he claims – before eventually adding a jaunty pirate hat for himself.

Hermann adds a complicated equation to the bottom corner of the wall one day, though he plays

coy when Newt ribs him about it, pretends flatly that it wasn't him.

No-one that has ever *lived* is that geeky, it has to be him. He never admits it, but Newt *knows*.

Hermann's mind is startling. Hermann's mind is capable, intuitive, colourful, well maintained and carefully cultivated. He can outthink most people. He can plot the Breach.

He. Has a cold.

It is *vile*.

He does not get colds, for a start, he is *German*, so it's the change from dry heat to the incessant humidity in Tokyo that is to blame. Or similar. His nose always goes red when he is sick. He has bought a scarf and some horribly expensive lemongrass and ginger, and he stubbornly comes into work for three days, feeling increasingly poor, until Thursday, when he lays his head on his desk for just a moment—

He wakes up suddenly when someone touches his shoulder.

“*What— What?*” He sits up suddenly, blinking, twisting in his seat to see Newton. His fingertips brush Hermann's neck as he turns, just above his collar – blissfully cool before he pulls his hand away, leaning back, his head tilted at Hermann, putting his hands deep in his lab coat pockets.

“Iiiii think you might wanna go home,” he says.

Hermann scowls. “No need, I'm—” He shakes his head, and immediately regrets it when the pressure feels like it might burst into supernovas, right behind his eyes. His throat is swollen. He moans briefly aloud and closes his eyes for just a second, rubbing his temples. “It is possible that I'm dying,” he admits, quietly.

Newton chuckles and leans in, propping his hip on the desk next to Hermann, which he does *just to annoy him*, he is sure.

“Possibly. You're the same colour as the wall. Except your nose.”

“Thank you *so* much.”

“No worries.”

He sniffs, drains the dregs of honey and lemon in his glass to lubricate his throat. Newt eyes the glass with obvious scepticism. “Surely you ought to be taking, I dunno, actual *drugs* for this?”

“Whilst I'm sure you would know a lot about recreational narcotics—” Newton makes a noise of outrage, “—I am perfectly capable of looking after myself.”

Newton - *idiot* - makes pistol hands at him and fires. “Yeah, 'cause that's working so well for you, man.” He walks away then, shaking his head.

Later, Joe's turn on the rota that Hermann insisted they draw up finishes with Snow Patrol - *why*, *why* – and Hermann might be ill, but not so ill that he has forgotten that it is Newton's turn now. He remembers, suddenly, just before it happens, looking up when the music stops to wince. The rest of the room do the same. A collective, shared intake of breath.

Newton hops down from his stool and crosses to the shared machine in the centre of the room. Silence, silence. Then quiet, lilting music comes through the speakers.

Mozart. The Clarinet Concerto.

Hermann takes a moment, taking that in. Newton looks up over the top of the screen, catching his eye, and grins at him.

“I believe I am hallucinating,” he says.

Agnieszka laughs loudly, across the room, and Newton grins wider, shrugs.

Later, still, Hermann may or may not be using the cupboards to prop himself up whilst waiting for the kettle to boil. Newton comes into the shared kitchen area to snag something from the fridge and Hermann pauses, then nods at him, goes back to tapping his fingers on the counter whilst waiting. Newton raises an eyebrow, sticks his head in the fridge, then comes out again with arms full of (probably) pilfered food.

“So I have to ask,” he says, kneeling the door shut and crossing next to Hermann to drop everything on the side next to him. “Beethoven, yeah? Or Mozart?”

Hermann takes another moment, to swallow past his dry throat, then rubs his jaw in thought. His head hurts. “Well. Difficult. Mainly as I cannot believe that you are asking me this question.”

“This question?” Newton crosses to stand close to him and starts throwing things that should not be on the same plate together. “This is the *eternal* question.”

He snorts, softly, which hurts, and pours himself a tea, ignoring that his arm is wobbling weakly, his head spinning. The surprise is palatable, the taste of it, of *affinity*, strange. He is unsure how to answer. Newton is not supposed to surprise him anymore, it’s been months.

“I prefer Chopin,” he lies, because it is easier.

Newton looks at him sharply, quizzical, but *hmm*s and continues after a pause. “Fair. Awesome.” He goes back to his plate. “A guy so afraid of being buried alive that he gets his sister to cut his heart out. That’s dedication.”

“I don’t believe that is *quite* how it happened.” Hermann picks up his mug in both hands and tucks it under his chin, to warm himself.

“Well, okay, she didn’t clamber into his coffin and cut it out herself, but still.” Newton layers potato salad, gherkins, crisps, tomato - then stops. “Hey.” He looks at Hermann. “Our job’s fairly dangerous. I don’t want to be buried alive either. You should do that for me.”

“...*What?*”

He looks unusually earnest. “Seriously. Say a kaiju comes stomping through here and the ceiling falls in and we’re all pretty much dead, except you, I dunno, maybe you survive through sheer force of untapped rage, but you’re unsure if I’m completely gone for some reason, maybe I’m knocked out in—”

“Total groupie joy?”

“—awed terror, fuck, you are a *bitch* - would you do that for me?”

He takes a mouthful of scalding tea, in desperation. Who is this *person*. “Newton.” His colleague makes a funny little face at that, eyes scrunching up, his mouth smiling, as he has done each of the 2.5 times Hermann’s said it. He swallows thickly, thinks, good *lord*, where to start, and does.

“Newton. I am convinced that if the mere fact of you stopping talking for more than 45 seconds doesn’t cause everyone *around* you to keel over in shock, it will be a more than satisfactory sign for me that you have expired. No...” He rubs the bridge of his nose, his head throbbing, the back of his neck clammy with sweat, and somehow, embarrassingly, trying not to laugh, or be oddly touched. He is *ill*. He ought to go home. “No organ removal required.”

Newton grins, and claps him on the shoulder with a hand that probably has butter all over it. “Great. Thanks, dude. I’m taking that all that thinly veiled criticism as a promise to do it, by the way, and I hereby promise to do the same for you.”

"To cut out my heart?"

"Sure."

“Wonderful.”

Hermann goes straight to bed when he gets home.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I am so ridiculous. I'm sorry. I'm HAVING SO MUCH FUN GUYS

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Towards the end of August, all temperature records in Tokyo are broken. There would be potential to study how the influx of alien lifeforms are damaging the ecosystem of the earth, if they had *time*, but they don't. It is also, however, the same day they announce the completion of new Shatterdomes in Sydney and nearly that of Los Angeles, and new Mark III Jaegers in Alaska, Vladivostok, and more.

It is a great day.

It is also what Hermann calls the Worst Day.

Harold Khan, new to their team, tries mixing a slither of kaiju liver with mineral phosphates, and unexpectedly splatters the testing zone with chemicals. Pinkish-purple foam hits the protective glass around him and is mostly contained, but for two places - because Khan is an *idiot* and *left the partition window open a crack*.

Somehow, it sprays through and hits the clock and, even though he is on the other side of the room, Hermann.

One unexpected, unlucky splash, right in the middle of his chest.

For one and a half seconds everyone stands deathly still, shocked, except Newton, who jumps, skids across a desk and slaps the blast water button on the wall with his palm. Then begins contained, orderly chaos.

Water sprays from the sprinklers exactly over the lab section immediately, drenching just that two metre square radius and Khan, whilst everyone else's training kicks in; they all take the ingrained three steps in one direction and check themselves and each other, shouting names. The standard safety radius was in place, and it's not like it was kaiju blue - everyone is unhurt, untouched, except for Khan, who is more shocked than anything else. He flings his splattered goggles and lab coat into a hazmat bin and stands, wobbling, under the spray.

Hermann, meanwhile, glances down at the splattered mess on his woollen vest, blanches, and hisses in rage.

The vest was *Dietrich's*.

He drops his chalk and book, yanks the garment off awkwardly, and heads as fast as he can towards the locker room at the back with his heart pounding in his ears over the *shhrrrrrrshh* of water. On the way, he throws the window in the partition glass fully open and chucks the vest viciously through it, so that it can be binned correctly.

He may or may not have aimed for Khan. Not *really*, of course not, but *oh* if he could have...

Khan has already tumbled out of the lab section, however, dripping, right into Newton - who shoves a jumpsuit at him and directs him to the decontamination shower room, watches him totter away, then snaps his head back around as he spots Hermann.

He got some of the spray as he tugged Khan out: his sleeves are wet, see-through, water drops on his glasses.

“Hermann?” He frowns, then his eyes go wide. “Hey!” He steps around Joe, who is handing out clean-up gear already, hopping forward a step. “You okay?”

“I’m fine!” Hermann shouts, loudly, and partly hops, partly skids over a splash on the floor, kicking the locker room door open with his good leg.

There is no water streaming in here. Blissful peace. He grabs an open locker door and uses it to help propel himself over a bench, and heads awkwardly towards the sinks, where he quickly unbuttons his palely stained shirt in front of the mirror, tugs it off, throws it on the floor and checks himself.

No marks. No burns. Just his skin, pale and wanly freckled, his arms, his trembling stomach. Nothing, though he waits the required 15 seconds for any effects he knows aren’t going to come. Just *in case*.

Then he sags, over his sink, relieved, breathing hard, and fairly pissed off.

Bloody *hell*.

The sound of water from outside lessens suddenly, easing off. There are conversations and shouts. A rough single laugh, murmured replies. Someone knocks urgently on the door.

“Hermann?” It’s Newton again. The door creaks, opening an inch. “I’m gonna need to check you’re okay—”

“I’m *fine*!” he calls, again, twisting in shock to stare at the door, his hands clutching the edge of the sink. The door stays mostly closed, but he can see Newton’s fingers holding the edge of it; the ring on his little finger, his elbow through the open crack, his leg, his boots.

A pause. “Can you swear that on, I dunno, Hawking or something?” Newton’s voice scratches a little in the top range. “Because if I don’t see you in 2 mins max I *will* come in there to check you myself. There’s protocol, which I know that you know. That I know.”

“*Please* don’t.” He rubs his face, then turns the taps on and starts to wash his hands. “I’m unharmed, the only casualty was my shirt.” *And my dignity*, he thinks. He splashes water through his hair. “Is Khan all right? Everyone else?”

“Uhh— Yep. Yep.” Newton’s voice goes up and down, glancing behind himself at something, a pause, and then he is back, speaking more quietly through the gap in the door. “Okay, just. There’s probably some clothes in my locker? No-one else has any spare, so you can... Knock yourself out.”

He leaves, the door swinging shut.

Hermann groans to himself, just resisting the urge to smash his forehead into the mirror.

Someone shouts once again outside. The sounds of cleaning up begin.

He washes his hands again, his arms and upper body, and then his face, not out of need but out of

desire to *feel* clean again, and dries himself with paper towels. Then he takes stock, assessing the situation. His white coat is in the main lab, hanging by the main door, but no, he has nothing else. His own locker has nothing in it but two books and an apple, if he recalls correctly, and he's sure that he does.

In the only locker that is open – Newton's, *of course*, he should have known, the man is incapable of leaving his things in an orderly way - he finds a balled-up black t-shirt at the back. Ah. He remembers this one from nine days before.

It has a hole in the collar and dancing skeletons on the front.

Hermann stands, torn, considering the options that are metaphorically in his hands. The idea of wearing his lab coat over nothing else is...strangely provocative, and uncomfortable, and not unlike a dream he once had that he will never, ever admit even on pain of death - yet the thought of putting on one of *Newton's* t-shirts is appalling on its own. Unsettling - and, unless there is something to hide it, likely to send him mad.

There are *so many* new ways to go mad, here in Tokyo, with an energetic manchild invading his space and more pressure than he's ever experienced.

He sighs, finally, scrubs his fingers through his hair and then smoothes his fringe flat nervously, sighs again, and pulls the t-shirt on over his head. It smells like—

His mind goes carefully blank.

No.

When he comes back into the main room everyone is back to fairly normal already. The clock is gone, and the heaters are on inside the testing section, drying everything with chemically clean air. Khan is back, shiny, a little raw-skinned on his cheeks, wearing the blue jumpsuit, his voice trembling a little but steadily re-cataloguing everything with Joe, going through his quantities and movements for the official record. Soo-jin is checking her own experiments, Anya is back frowning at her computer with her enormous headphones on, and the glass is already completely clean and dry around the lab. The floor is shiny there, still wet.

Newton has just pushed his damp shirt sleeves up, towelled his hair roughly with something – it points in every direction except up - and is sitting on his desk, re-lacing his boots.

Hermann passes them all, walking carefully, chin up. If things go a fraction quieter, he doesn't pay it any mind; he pulls his lab coat on over the t-shirt, buttons it all the way up pointedly, glances once over the room to dare his colleagues *with his eyes* to say anything, and manages to totally ignore Newton, who has gone carefully, vibrantly still across the room.

He turns back to his boards before anyone can spot the colour that has come out, high on his cheeks.

"You are an idiot, Mr Khan," he calls.

"S-sorry, Dr. Gottlieb!"

An hour later, Newton brings him a tea.

"I didn't know you had skin underneath all your old man shirts," he says, quiet, under his breath. Hermann looks up at him, viciously furious and stunned. Newton is smiling at him though, almost laughing, but strangely awkward, his eyes gentle, his mouth soft. He's being odd. *Why?*

“Congratulations on that.”

“I’m still not sure if you have skin underneath your kaiju groupie symbols.” He says it as witheringly as he can. Don’t rise to it, never rise to it—

“Hey! You don’t want my stuff? I could have left you semi-naked, buddy.”

“I wish you had, this t-shirt smells,” he snaps, embarrassed.

Newton huffs a strangled noise, knocks the model aeroplane on Hermann’s desk over, and strides away.

As soon as 5pm comes around, Hermann leaves early. He rushes into his room, throws the t-shirt in with his own laundry, and then pours himself a very, very large scotch.

The next day, it is even hotter than before. The only one in when he arrives is Khan, who flinches - genuinely *flinches* - when he comes in.

Hermann almost pauses, but instead gives him a careful nod. “Mr Khan.”

Khan smiles, nods back, drooping across his workstation in relief. “Dr Gottlieb.”

Newton finally walks in at 10.11am, wearing enormous black sunglasses and a (ridiculous) cap that Hermann has never seen before, pulled down low. His t-shirt is actually white, and has nothing on the front. Oh extraordinary day.

He holds a huge coffee to his chest like a child as he wanders over to his desk, the one directly behind Hermann’s.

“I’m hungover,” he announces. His hands are shaking when he puts everything down on his work surface, then he groans, sits, and lays his head down on it. “*Hungover*. Nobody touch me if you all want to live.”

Hermann, half-turned to watch him, purses his lips. He also feels a little...tender today, to be honest, but he won’t be.

“Don’t be a baby,” he says instead. “Self-inflicted lamentations are not appealing to anyone.”

“Shut *up*, Hermann.” Newton makes a rude hand gesture at him and then turns away, wrapping his arms around his desk for a moment as though it is a lifeline to him. His arms flex, the nape of his neck bare and brown above his t-shirt, one of his wrists coloured by ink and the other clean. If one overlooks who he *is*, for a second, visually that is so—

Hermann looks away so sharply that he inhales chalk, and coughs intermittently all day.

Dietrich comes to visit him in Tokyo at the end of autumn, without any actual warning. This is a characteristic move from his elder brother, and one Hermann should have seen coming - his emails had been suspiciously vague, recently, as opposed to the standard four page rambles.

It’s Friday, early evening. Hermann is sitting on a bench down the street from the Shatterdome, sheltering from the wind under the monstrous metallic eaves with his hood pulled up, his buggered – though not so buggered as all that, they’ve had a few months of respite and he’s been getting some stretches and self-guided physio in, and hasn’t needed his cane for two whole weeks - leg propped up on a wall. The other is bent at the knee with his tablet on it.

The waterproof screen reflects the lights of the city, and the wind is cool, refreshing and familiar after months of humidity. He's putting off going back to his new quarters in the dome because, to be frank, he can barely stretch in his tiny room and that is *depressing*, and he's tired. The thought, now that he has sat down, of getting up and walking back into the Shatterdome, of getting into the lift, getting out, is just...unappealing. He feels lethargic, drained. Not to mention feeling somewhat *lazy* today. He can be lazy, on occasion, and has long accepted that about himself. Everyone has faults. His are not earth-shattering.

At that moment, therefore, he cannot muster the enthusiasm to even start the journey back. He'd also really like a beer, or something similar; a craving that has crept up on him slowly throughout a particularly inexplicable week. Perhaps he will stop in somewhere. Somewhere none of the rest of the team will be...

"I definitely should have made that bet with Karla that I'd find you reading," someone says, and Hermann jerks his head up so fast his hood falls down. "I'd have made a *lot* of money."

"Dietrich!" he says, stupidly.

His elder brother is wrapped in a bright red jumper and long black coat, his large, angular shoulders stretching the fabric, grinning widely at Hermann. He's got a duffel bag and-- oh, he's grown a beard at some stage.

"*Kon'nichiwa*," Dietrich says, raising a hand in a wave, then laughs at himself.

Hermann rolls his eyes and puts his own hand out.

"Help me up, idiot."

Dietrich clasps his hand and pulls him to his feet, then more, pulling him into a hug which generally involves folding himself around Hermann and chinning him a little.

"*Ouch*, oaf," he complains.

"Shh," his brother says. "You're skinnier. I think you've shrunk."

"That is physically impossible." His face is mashed into Dietrich's scratchy throat, so he elbows him in the stomach until he is released. Dietrich takes hold of him by the upper arms though, kisses his cheeks three times, and takes a good look at him, so Hermann takes the opportunity to do the same: sandy hair too long on top and gone flat in the wind, his tortoiseshell glasses, the parts where the tips of his ears have gone pink.

"Es ist *gut*, dich zu sehen," Dietrich smiles, "mein kleiner Bruder."

"*Dietrich*," he sighs, wriggling free to put a stop to that and adjusting his rumpled jumper underneath his coat, then lifting his chin. He points at his brother. "You need to accept that no matter how much you draw attention to me, Bastien will *always be taller than you*."

"You are a spoilsport." This is an old argument.

"Your hair appears to be an early 21st century throwback, now, have you taken on a new identity?"

Dietrich scoffs. "Mine? *Mine*? Look at you, is that an *army* haircut? We are not a family of soldiers."

"We are not a family of anything in particular, thank goodness." He bends to retrieve his tablet and

bag. Dietrich takes his bag immediately, pokes him in the cheek when he tries to take it back and dodges Hermann's outraged kick, then offers his other arm for Hermann to use while he hisses and works his knee until it clicks.

"We could be a family of drinkers," Dietrich suggests, after a moment.

Hermann glances up at him, amused, and pleased, understanding the reference it contains. When their grandfather died, after the Jewish burial he'd surprised them all by requesting in his will, after the *shiva* they'd done their best to hold in a tiny Welsh village, they'd left their Mother with relatives and their Father on his way to his hotel, and stumbled to the nearest pub to hold their own mini wake. Just the four of them.

It had been...sombre, heavy, and spectacular. Tumblers of burning whiskey, first. Then beer. Too much. For one thing, they had discovered that Karla can down a pint faster than any of them. Hermann had spluttered an air bubble halfway through his and covered his face in liquid, which had made Dietrich laugh hysterically with his head down on the table. For another, he had then ended the night softly singing *Holzhaacker Baum* with Bastien, their heads tipped together, slumped back in their bench seat, before dripping tears into his last drink until Karla kissed his ear and Dietrich ordered them all home.

"Perhaps," he agrees. "That *would* be an illustrious addition to the associations of the Gottlieb name."

Dietrich nods. "Let's do it - Bastien says I have to take you for at least one beer before you start complaining."

Hermann shakes his head, standing steadily now whilst he buttons his coat closed. "He gets worse every year, doesn't he?"

"Yes," Dietrich nods. "He is *awful*."

"Come on, I'm sure we can find somewhere."

An hour later they are tucked into the corner of a bar covered in stickers, down one bottle and onto the next. They've caught up on the important things; Dietrich's work teaching Anthropology and Sociology in Munich, his relatively steady status as a single, poorly-visioned but intelligent 6ft romantic-god, even if he does have elbow pads on every jumper he owns, the fact that not enough women have come to the same realisation on this as him yet, and his burgeoning desire to set fire to his neighbour's speaker system if they don't stop playing *the same song every night*.

"Mother and Father say hello, of course, though I'm sure you hear more from him than me—" Both true and not: Father's communications are frequent, but mainly full of PPDC data, and little on himself. "Our illustrious siblings send their love as well, but now." Dietrich nudges Hermann in the (good) thigh with his foot, sitting opposite him on a high stool. "I want to hear more about your colleagues. You are nothing but factual and boring in your emails, like always."

"I have given all requisite information." Hermann bristles. "Surely you ought to be more interested in *me*."

Dietrich snorts. "I know you, I know exactly what you'll be doing, and that is plenty enough to make me feel reassured that the world will be saved eventually - but even *you* can't work entirely alone."

"Would that I could," he laments, smoothing the label on his bottle flat again with his thumb.

“Details, Hermann.” Dietrich taps his own bottle on the table, the rat-a-tat loud over the hum of the rest of the bar which is slowing filling up as they talk. “All I know is that one of them is crazy, one of them is an idiot, and three of them are ‘fine’. I want to be more up to date than that on the other amazing brains out there.”

“Which is a potentially unwise course of action that I strenuously recommend against,” Hermann counters. “It won’t reassure you.”

“Because of the crazy one?”

“Yes.”

His brother raises a pale eyebrow. “Really? He sounded *fun*. And as you well know, information, personal details, and something to relate to, is good for morale and motivation during times of crisis.”

“Thank you, Teacher, for that illuminating information that I already knew.” Dietrich gives him two fingers as he takes a mouthful of beer. “We did take that class together, if you recall,” Hermann continues. He’d jumped ahead to Dietrich’s year for that class, starting college in Munich early.

Dietrich wipes the foam off his moustache with his fingertips, smacks his lips. “Yes, and some of us took in the lessons and went on to become an *expert*, whilst others wilfully ignored the data and retreated back into their own brains. *Now*,” he begins, then immediately pauses for a second to take his jumper off. The bar is getting warm, a little humid, and he continues to talk whilst the fabric is over his face, muffling his voice, which makes Hermann roll his eyes. He makes sure to stop before Dietrich emerges looking fairly...static.

“The news reporting on the PPDC always follows the same patterns,” he says. “Positive, positive, vague, giant robot, we killed a kaiju, vague, positive. I would like more information in order to feel personally invested, and therefore part of the process, and therefore *safer*.”

Hermann pulls a face, but of course, he understands. He truly does. His elder brother has always loved *detail*. It’s the only area they ever really overlapped interests in, although Hermann’s mind was full of details that took the form of numbers, that took their own connected shapes, *synaesthetically*, yes, numbers that he wanted to fit together, move around, touch the colours of, discover.

Dietrich always got distracted by details about *people*.

Hermann sighs. “What would you like to know?”

“Tell me more about Geiszler! He’s German, yah? Anyone that drives you to make a mistake in an email has to be worth meeting.”

He sits up straight. “I do not make mistakes.”

“Oh ho!” Dietrich points at him, openly pleased, then leans down, digs into his bag, and presents Hermann with a printed piece of paper, thrusting it across the table with a flourish. He has obviously been wanting to do this for a long time. His expression is *terrifying*. “There, circled.” He stabs it with his finger. Hermann sniffs and looks down, bringing the paper closer until it is in focus. It’s an email from around a year ago.

—of my colleagues is fairly unusual; here please read infuriatingly moronic and gifted, but most definitely certifiably insane. I am awaiting the day he slips and drowns face-first in a kaiju sample

Hermann stares down at his own error. "...Scheiße."

Dietrich, throwing his head back, laughs booming at the low ceiling, clapping his hands together. "Ahhhh," he sighs, clearly loving every second of Hermann's discomfort, "*das ist wunderbar*. I wanted to meet this Geiszler - I was heading for the dome when I found you on that bench, unfortunately. I was hoping to come in and embarrass you."

"You are a terrible role model." Hermann folds the paper sharply into a perfect square, running his thumbnail along the edges, puts it in his pocket, and drains half of his beer. "Be *extremely thankful* that you found me when you did," he gasps, when he surfaces.

Dietrich definitely kicks him in his good shin, that time. "Talk, brother, you remember that thing you're actually very good at?"

This is another old argument. *Use your words, Hermann*, repeated ad nauseam, until he did so and then everyone regretted asking.

Two beers later, he is up to date with his time in the PPDC and his colleagues. He has just reached yesterday, when Newton and he had yelled at each other for an hour over Pascal, mathematician, versus Pascal, programming language, ending with Newton pointedly snapping all of Hermann's chalk, stamping on it, and grinding the last piece into dust under his boot. Hermann, appalled, had just watched him.

Whilst he's explained, he has moved the collection of coasters and empty bottles on the table in front of him around until they fit into a pleasing spiral. "Today," he finishes, "he burnt a hole in his jeans with hydrochloric acid, called me an albatross, and played air guitar for five minutes in front of his whiteboards whilst he was 'thinking' about molecular dystrophy." He moves the last bottle into place. Perfect. "Idiot."

He looks up. Dietrich's glasses have slid to the end of his nose, his chin on his folded hands, slumped comfortably over the table, watching him. He continues to stare at Hermann for a second, then nods.

"*Mein Gott*," he agrees. Sitting up straight, he rubs his jaw with both palms, fluffing up his beard, then nods again without saying anything, and goes to the bar.

He comes back with two whiskeys, one of which he plonks in front of Hermann.

Hermann raises an eyebrow. "I agree that he's exasperating, but things are not so bad as to drive us to drink."

"*Prost*," Dietrich says, pointedly. Hermann rolls his eyes, and drinks. Whilst he's still swallowing, Dietrich continues, on purpose, the complete and utter *git*, with: "So you like him."

Hermann flinches, gasps, chokes, the whiskey goes up and down somewhere around his oesophagus simultaneously, and he coughs until he can swallow, tears springing to his eyes.

"*You—*" He pats his chest with his palm, trying to get his breath back. His brother watches him go through red, pink, then white, amused. He takes it back. Bastien is a dream, Dietrich is *a complete bastard*.

"No, no," he starts, gasping. "Do not get ideas. I know that you like to *think* you know everything about the human condition but you do not."

"I know *you*. You just ranted for 35 minutes without stopping. You haven't said this much in one

sitting without using diagrams since we both lived in Bavaria.”

“*Dietrich*. I’ve requested he be transferred to another lab four times this year alone, I genuinely believe that he is a danger to my health, I...” Hermann runs out of words. “I loathe him in ways I cannot fully describe. You are taking a ridiculous notion and running with it.” He tries not to panic. Dietrich with an idea is like an exasperatingly hairy dog with a bone, impossible to shake from it. See: the first time Hermann climbed their neighbour’s wall based on familial peer pressure and nearly broke all ten of his fingers doing so, cigarettes, coming out at 22, and *ever* inflicting any of his family on Vanessa, except Karla, to his continued and enduring regret.

“This is not a notion, this is a solid hypothesis based on evidence.”

“Do *not* try to out-science me.”

“Yah, yah, yah.” Dietrich is grinning, as if he hasn’t just gone totally insane in a crowded bar in Tokyo. “Calm down before you burst a blood vessel - I’m not saying you’re in love with him, I’m merely saying that you like him, despite yourself, which is good for you—”

“Go back to Munich,” he hisses. “And never, ever return.”

Dietrich snorts, wide-eyed, and holds up placating, large hands. “All right, all right. He just...reminds me of Vanessa. How you’re so different.”

Hermann continues to glare. “As I’ve told you before, multiple times, I don’t wish to discuss yours or Bastien’s opinions on Vanessa, either.”

Bastien had called her ‘fit’, the last time they did, and asked in genuine seriousness ‘when that had happened’. Dietrich had leaned in with a serious face and asked how she found being a model with a biochemistry degree, did the others treat her differently, did they fight bodily on set, and could he tell them about it?

“Oh, fine.” His brother blows his hair off his forehead and looks at him with exasperation. “Change of subject. I’ll keep your secret, I’m good at that.” He is. His face goes soft as he says it, as if he doesn’t realise what he’s said, or going to say, until he does – *oh*, yes, remember that time when you confided that you were being bullied to me in a letter, in code, and all I could do about it was hug you when you got off the plane and ruffle your hair until you kicked me? Hermann gets that too, of course, right in the solar plexus. That was a *low* blow, unintentional or not. Filthy. Unbecoming.

“I hate you,” he snaps.

Dietrich looks a *little* ashamed, at least.

Chapter End Notes

German translations:

Es ist gut, dich zu sehen, mein kleiner Bruder - It's good to see you, my little brother
das ist wunderbar - This is wonderful!

Prost - Cheers

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to ikchen for rescuing my German! <3

Translations at the bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Never let it be said that Shatterdome quarters are an example of money being saved in supplying comfort for staff. That is a slanderous falsehood, or at least, totally variable depending on personal experience and opinion.

Newt actually really *likes* his.

Cosy, for one thing, close to the lab, 2, and hilariously, only a few doors down from Hermann's – which has been a source of near *constant* amusement to Newt since they stepped out of the elevator together on the first day on the new base, their keycards in hand, walking increasingly slowly in the same direction, eyes narrowing with each step. He'd stopped at his door, watched Hermann limp on six steps to his, and stop. Recheck the number. Sag, and turn to look at him, his jaw clenched.

Newton had cackled, bowed, and slammed his door on Hermann's outraged face.

It's the gift that keeps on giving. He should have taken PPDC quarters from day *one*. And yeah, Newt is taking this one as a win, he's taking what he can get here, he is taking this as *karmic retribution* for the universe – this one, not the other one where awesome, terrible aliens come from – contriving, nay, *scheming*, to put Doctor Gottlieb into one of his t-shirts a few months before. Because it was the worst thing he's ever seen. It was *the worst day of his life*.

He'd blinked, blinked, smiled nicely, made sure everyone was clean and safe and back to work in the lab, okay, and then gone into the bathroom to bite his fist, smack his forehead into the closed door and let out the hysterical laughter. The hysteria. A groan.

It is *insane* that it took so long for him to know that Hermann has such pale skin along his biceps, and he could have lived happily to awesomely, terrifyingly scatty old age without that knowledge. He'd suddenly looked 10 years younger. Actually looked his *age* in a t-shirt, instead of an old man shirt and another three layers on top of that, with his hair in damp, dark spikes and a whole new bunch of unexpectedly lovely boyskin everywhere.

He hid it away again under his lab-coat and things went back to Situation Normal, but Newton's basically eidetic memory is not going to let up on that, matter how hard he tries to get rid of it, even though he'd strongly committed to fogging it out as soon as possible with alcohol in the closest bar to the dome he could find, and a pretty exciting evening with what turned out to be 3 members of a Japanese death metal covers band, a truck driver from Ohio, and a barmaid who let him teach her how to prop up glasses using only 2 coasters. Physics is great and all, but it was a *lot* of alcohol, and not his finest work.

He tripped over the pile of books by his bed when he got back and nearly brained himself on his

desk.

Sigh.

The next day he'd found the t-shirt washed, folded neatly and discreetly put back in his locker. And he hasn't been able to wear it since. Hanna bought it for him that the first time they went to SoHo, and now it's *ruined*.

Today, tonight, it's not very late but he is being unusually orderly. Already brushed his teeth, decided not to shave again, re-read 7 chapters of *The Hitchhiker's Guide* to quiet his brain and is happily lying face down in bed with his glasses up on his forehead, trying to focus on the blurry area where he knows the light switch is, calculating the distance and force needed to throw the book at it and get it on the first go. Because he definitely hasn't got the energy to get up and press it himself.

Then there's a thump, a metallic clang and a— giggle? in the corridor outside. A murmur of voices.

In German.

He leaps up, skids on barefeet and is at his peephole in two seconds – yeah, he is nosy. All he can see is a blur of black because he's too close, *eyelashes*, woops, he mashes his glasses back on and his view shows him—

Woah.

Hermann is being held carefully at his door by some guy's hand under his elbow, some *dude* who is a few inches taller and wider, with really fun hair from the back. Hermann's coat is unbuttoned, his shirt only half tucked in, and his cheeks are pink, and he's leaning into the guy, chatting away with his eyes lidded, almost every single one of his teeth on show because he is smiling, head tipped back towards the other guy's. And.

What?

The world implodes, silently, and with little warning. Newt wasn't sure Hermann even— he means, of course he's a red-blooded (mostly) German male and all that, he must have *sex* or at least a vested interest in it which Newt has definitely *tried* not to wonder about, but the only person he's ever seen Hermann talk with in any *way* resembling fondness or interest is a woman with a Londonish accent he's walked in on Hermann on the phone with a couple of times, very late or early, depending on your opinion – her laugh is pretty loud and Newt has not damaged his hearing *that* much with his music, he didn't even *have* to eavesdrop to hear her. It's not been a particularly strenuous mental leap to work out that she's probably the gorgeous dark skinned, tall woman standing on a wall and grinning in front of some old building, in the photo that Hermann's got in a drawer in his desk – which Newt has only glimpsed whilst strolling by *accidentally*, Hermann was reaching blindly into it without even taking his eyes off his screen, rooting about poorly. Newton just notices stuff. Like this.

Brand new evidence in the corridor outside.

Stranger Danger whispers something at Hermann, blonde head ducked down, pushing the door open, and Hermann rolls his eyes *with his entire body*, which involves sort of arcing and flopping delicately and drunkenly through the doorway into his room. Hands help him, nudging his lower back, already reaching up to the back of his coat—

“Holy fuck!” Newt yelps, and yanks his door open, jumps down the steps, and leaps down the

corridor. He skids again to a stop in front of the still open door and manages to catch it with his fingers.

“Hi!” he says, elbowing the door wider. “Are you— Hello.” He looks up, stops. “Uh.”

He went to college *young*, okay, and an impressive share of parties and gigs, and he taught at MIT for long enough to go to and then hear and then *oversee* the seminars about alcohol and consent, and to formulate his own pretty strong fucking feelings about it from everything else he did and saw - so his heart is thudding up in his chest, kick-drumming in his throat, but everything here looks weirdly...calm.

Intimate.

Familiar?

Two sets of attention have snapped to him, paused in the middle of whatever it is that they were doing which he cannot entirely categorise yet. Hermann’s staring at him in obvious, slightly drunk horror. The other guy is tall. Really tall.

“Everything...okay in here?” Newt asks, folding his arms.

Silence for a second. Newt gets gooseflesh on his legs, *shit* the corridor is cold, and though he is rocking a badass sleep tee here admittedly his boxers are a little thin, but fuck you, he’d have run out naked as long as he had his glasses. No matter your ragey, bubblingly poisonous feelings towards someone, no bad touching is ever good. *Priorities*. Glasses.

Strange men with his genuinely Singular lab partners.

Hermann continues to look at him as though he can’t believe what he’s looking at - yeah, Newt feels *that* sentiment currently pretty strongly. One glance down his bare legs and back up, which is creepy because the other guy does the same, at exactly the same time, in exactly the same way, like two guard-dogs sizing up prey. They glance at each other. The other one is starting to smile, slowly, in little increments that all lead up to a *grin*. Caninely pleased.

Nope, not appealing, Newt tells himself, distantly—

A bang - Hermann has wobbled on his bad leg, slammed a hand down on the desk to steady himself, and sighed heavily at the same time, reaching up to rub his face with one hand. The strange man links an equally long arm with his rightaway, puts an equally big hand on his shoulder to steady him, and Newt thinks *okay hold up buddy* and takes one step in, and then his biologist brain kicks in, presenting a perfect, well referenced report based on the visual evidence on show.

“*Ohhh*, fuck,” he says, literally slapping his own forehead with one hand. His ring bashes into his skin. “That’s your brother, right? Gotta be.”

Long, long legs, same hairline, similar skintone, dominant genes, the same curious, deepset eyes, and okay their colouring was different but it was all close enough to work, phenotypes, hello. Only another Gottlieb could pull off pinched, pissy and amused all at the same time, in one face, rolling through each as smoothly as water.

“It’s that obvious?” Brother says, raising his eyebrows. He looks at Hermann. “Oh *no*.”

“Shut up,” Hermann tells him. “He’s a genetics expert. Sort of.” He shrugs, then covers his face with a hand again.

“Haha!” Newton says, because this is a parallel world and he is alert, all stations go, he is *loving this so much*.

Both sets of eyes snap back to him. Hermann’s brother has awesome glasses. *Glasses*. Newt *knew* that was going to be a future problem for Hermann - he’s definitely been squinting at things for a while now, that’s all Newt’s saying, except he’s not been saying it because Hermann would punch him. Newt learned very young when to stop talking, *just* before physical retribution. There might still be more that he wants to say, but being able to stop himself has always been the sign for him on whether he’s doing okay, holding steady, or whether maybe he might need to talk to someone, or get some sleep, or take those meds he’s had the same bottle of since he was 17, currently wadded inside a pair of socks in his bottom drawer, that he’s only ever had to take 2 of but kept, as stubborn proof. And fallback.

Luckily, he is a *master* at knowing when to stop, okay.

He just doesn’t always choose to make it when *other* people might want him to.

“Dietrich,” Hermann sighs, like he is dying, “this is Dr. Geiszler. Dr. Geiszler, my brother, Professor Dr. Gottlieb.” He gestures vaguely between him, then starts fighting his way out of his coat, turning away and apparently giving up on shame, and life.

Dietrich(!)’s grin gets wider. He takes two giant steps forward to reach out and shake Newton’s hand in both of his, and fuck he has great, scary enthusiasm.

“Hallo! Freut mich, Sie kennen zu lernen,” he says, all in a warm rush, then stares down at Newt for a second, totally obvious as he takes in Newt’s tats, his bare feet, his sleepy hair. Newt sort of unconsciously stands a little straighter, a little dazed.

“Danke. Gleichfalls,” he says, in his best, clearest accent, and Dietrich beams and claps him on the shoulder.

It hurts a little, *hey* he is bigger than his brother, still not large but a little heavier, broader, taller, and seems to be some kind of polar opposite sent by the world to fuck with Newt’s head. Jeans. He’s wearing jeans. Who knew a Gottlieb could wear *jeans*; would Hermann ever— No, no, Newt and the entire PPDC would have to spontaneously stab themselves in the face, because the world would be ending.

His accent is so, *so* Bavarian, even more than Hermann’s. Newt really wants to giggle at it but he just about stops himself with his exemplary willpower. Dietrich is clearly a little drunk as well, with ruddy cheeks, beer on his breath. Big. Big hands. Brothers. Long, slim legs. Newton’s mind is hooked on a perpetual loop, here. The infinity symbol. Fractal spirals. Refraction. Ouroboros. *They’re related*. The DNA, the nurture, the nature... Newt is stuck, skipping back and back like scratched hipster vinyl. He needs to say something. The unreality of this has knocked him totally off course and, wow he has so many *questions*. Immediately. Tangled up in twisted strands of them. He really wants to touch *everything* to see—

“Goodnight, Newton!” Hermann calls, bringing him back. He looks away from Dietrich’s bearded face and angular mass to see his lab partner sitting heavily down on his bed, taking a deep breath, then bend to unlace his shoes.

“Right.” Newt nods once, time to *go*, and backs up out of the door with his hand up. “Uh.” He stops, to salute Dietrich. “Sorry for thinking you were a pervert, my man,” he says.

Dietrich blinks, and then actually *guffaws*. People don’t normally do that. He has to grin, pausing

on the steps. This is like TV. This is *gold*.

“No problem, kid,” Dietrich chuckles, waving a hand. He glances back at his brother, who pulls some sort of face Newton hasn’t seen before and then raises his arms heavenward with his shoes in them in a gesture Newt *does* recognise; the one that means, Yes, he is an alien species, I *know*, before Dietrich swivels drunkenly back to look at Newt. He’s still smiling, and he is super blonde but he looks like Hermann, only taller and a little fuller-mouthed. Also, Hermann’s socks are argyle today. *What*.

Suddenly, it’s too weird. Newt’s chest doesn’t know what to *do*.

“Yep, too weird,” Newt agrees with his brain, and his confused body, and back-hops down the steps. “G’night!” He pauses, then leans back towards the door. “We’ll laugh about this one day, Hermann,” he promises, back into the room.

Hermann hisses something, and a shoe hits the door with a thunk. He must be pissed, he *loves* those shoes - don’t think Newt hasn’t noticed that they’re always perfectly polished every Monday, no matter how much crap gets on them throughout the week. Newt is observant like *no* man.

Dietrich flinches at the bang, then just shakes his head with the sage amusement of a fairly drunk dude in his (apparently) early 30s, already trying to toe off his own shoes spectacularly badly. He’s wobbling so much that he has to use the door to hold *himself* up, now that he’s not concentrating on his brother. Newt snickers to himself. We have all been there, buddy, he thinks, and gives him a supportive wave.

“Gute Nacht,” he says to Dietrich, quieter, then turns to head back towards his room.

“See you tomorrow!” Dietrich calls out into the corridor after him, before he pushes the door.

Newt turns, pleased, catches half a second of Hermann’s voice going *shrill*, and then the door shuts heavily.

Actually - unfortu-fucking-nately - he doesn’t see Dietrich or Hermann at all the next day, or Sunday, at all. He is super disappointed because the whole thing needed a lot more study. Stunned, curious evaluation and exploration. Some note-taking.

He’d woken up early and buttoned up his cleanest shirt and basically run to breakfast, only to find the normal, boring people there. Fuck. Hermann probably vetoed it with his sibling and dragged him off somewhere else to avoid the Shatterdome entirely all weekend. It’s...disappointing, but not surprising. People usually fall into 2 categories with Newt: the ones who say *ohmygod, come and meet every single person I know, you are awesome*, and the ones who say *Can we pretend we don’t know each other?* and then stop calling him.

He’d hoped, after this long, that maybe Hermann would fall into the former category. Thought maybe they’d have some laughs. But that’s. That’s life.

It *could* have been great, though. He’d seen himself, reaching out to touch, to explore, and Hermann slapping his hands away. Just. Fun!

Fuck.

When he returns to his quarters on Sunday night, though, scuffing his boots along the corridor, he spots something and rushes up to his door.

There’s a business card tucked inside the peephole.

Dr. Dietrich Gottlieb

Professor für Soziologie & Anthropologie

LMU München

At the bottom is a scribbled chicken scrawl that is the total polar opposite of Hermann's precise, neat hand. *Let me know if my brother ever doesn't speak to you for more than 3 days, that's usually a bad sign. The rest is fine. Trust me.*

The email address and phone number are underlined, with a smiley face added to it.

Newt grins, knowingly, smugly, all week. He is a king. He is on *fire*. He finishes one project, decides to override all the discussion he's started with the head honchos about it and just start *sending* data for the upgrades that the kaiju training simulators need, because they *do* need them, and he can tell, he knows - he's seen how much bigger, badassier and scarier the kaiju are getting. And he's the best person to do it. He is a genius with machines.

Wednesday, he even hip-bumps Anya as they're filing samples and then thinks shit, shouldn't have done that, she is twice his age and a fierce Texan mama - but his luck comes in and she appreciates it *way* more than he might have predicted she would, staring at him open-mouthed for 2 seconds with her retro giant headphones that her son got her hooked around her neck, then doing it back.

He nearly falls over from the force. She just chuckles at him, fondly.

Life is completely fucking A+.

Hermann finally spills Newt's coffee on purpose, on Thursday, bringing the cup over but dumping it hard enough on the work surface to make it lap over the edges. He's gone from treading carefully around Newt, to openly watching him with narrowed eyes, to giving up on patience and trying to provoke him into saying *something* about what he saw. Newt is not going to. This is way more fun.

He just adjusts his glasses and grins up at him.

"*Thanks*, Hermann," he says, smoothly. Purrs.

"Stop calling me that!" Hermann snaps, then sighs, takes a deep breath, and walks off.

Newt watches him go, grinning at the back of his head.

Oh yeah. He has *got the power back*.

In his own defence, Newt doesn't actually realise how bad his room has got, until the morning he comes back and he can't exactly get the door open.

He shoves the heavy metal as far as he can, wiggles in through the gap with his arms full of coffee and bagels, catches his belt on the way and hops to get free, then shuts the door behind him with his foot and then takes in the piles of books with fresh eyes.

...

Okay, when he really thinks about it he can see some....disorder.

Having a tiny room doesn't exactly help, for one thing, but yeah, he is definitely not sure which

book here came from which person anymore. This is the problem with book swapping, which he's been doing with colleagues and techs since day one in Lima. Since MIT. Since *school*. Reading is his Thing. Reading is sexy, and Newt loves books. He really, really *loves* books. Unfortunately, it has got him into this situation more than once.

He surveys his room, pulling a face. Ugh, crap. Dropping his breakfast on his desk, he thinks, looks, takes his shirt off for comfort, stretches, and then spends an hour cross-legged on the floor, re-organising the piles neatly.

He flicks through them occasionally, which is why it takes so long, but eh. Ones to read, ones he hates, ones he loves, ones to give back, and the ones he needs to reference most frequently. And then there's all his manga, over there. Well, this is what you get for reading everything. Anything. He reads whilst he gets tattooed, he reads whilst he waits for samples to oxidise, he reads on the subway. His longest relationship has been the torrid love affair he's been having with Douglas Adams since he was 13, inbetween history texts, studies of natural life, sci-fi, classics, biographies. Hermann had pulled a face at him when he caught Newt reading *Eat, Pray, Love*, but he'd just shrugged; he's not fussy, he will try anything, but know that he *will* unleash his opinions afterwards and he will hold back for no one.

The only book he has ever ragequit was *Twilight*, because fuck, *no*.

He's not a book snob, he's a book *god*.

When he's finished, slurping the last of his cold coffee and licking his fingertips, he looks around and realises that it is possible he has also built a fort with the stacks, at some point. Well hey, awesome. He lays back in it, sprawls out on the floor, and finds himself staring at the strip light in the ceiling, grinning.

Then his grin fades.

It is a Saturday morning. He is a 27 year old, virile genius with one of the top brains in the world, great ink and a great ass, and he just spent an hour of his life re-organising books. Aaaand it's not the first time he's done it, either.

It strikes him that he really needs a hobby which doesn't involve dissection, and that he needs to get *laid*. Or even some normal, physical interaction with someone would be really great. He has friends but they are generally in a different country, and his colleagues are...interesting. Maybe just a hug, you know? Maybe even just that.

Shit.

The ping of Skype makes him jump, and he realises that he has dozed off, and dribbled all over his chin. He jerks upright, flails, and blinks at his screen over on the desk.

'Hanna' calling.

Crawling quickly over the piles, he lunges and hits accept. When she appears, she's pixellated to shit but her red hair is immediately obvious.

"*Cousin!*" She yells at him, voice coming crackly over the line. "Were you sleeeeeeeping?"

He's laughing, already. "Wait, wait..." He attacks the keyboard, his fingers flying over the keys, resolving the issues, adjusting location, feed - and then there she is. Crisp, perfect vision.

She grins at him. She's got a ring in her nose now, instead of the stud. He still loves the contrast

between her dyed paprika hair and her naturally dark eyebrows, her lipstick and her white teeth. Behind her, her dorm room looks exactly the same as every time before, in early evening light; her pictures, her patterned bedspread, it's Friday night in NY for her, and all of a sudden the normality of her life is glowing, drawing him in, the best thing he's seen all week.

"What's happening, kid?" He grins back at her and her smile goes fond. She folds a leg up under her so she can rest her chin on her knee.

"Not much, not much. You?"

He rakes his fingers through his hair, and laughs. "Sleeping on the floor, yeah."

"I *knew* it." She snorts, then points at the screen. Her nails are blue. "You're fighting aliens, please no sleeping. I'm the one studying Composition here with nothing exciting to tell you."

"Hey, that is the *shit*, don't let anyone tell you otherwise. How is it?"

She pulls a face. "Have not slept for a while. Trying to finish my final piece for two week's time! And it is not going well. Thought I'd call my favourite cousin—"

"*Only* cousin."

"—and practise English for a while."

This is an age old excuse, as she if *ever* needed practise with a rocking Aunt and cousin who are native speakers and as many trips to the US as Gunter could afford for her, as well as with Newt going to Berlin for holidays almost every summer. She barely has an accent, especially now.

Newt met her at the airport and went with her to settle into that dorm room. That was just before he left for Lima.

It's been years.

Fuck. Is he getting old?

"You're calling me on a Friday night?" he asks, rubbing the dribble off his face.

"You cannot complain. Saturday morning and you're asleep on the floor? Someone been keeping you up?" she suggests, raising her eyebrow.

"*Hanna!*" He always sounds more German when he says it like this, drawing out the *haaaa* inoutrage. He cannot discuss sex with her ever, ever, ever. She giggles at him. "And, no. Alas for my life."

"Oh. Because you are almost naked, you know."

He glances down; he'd forgotten. "Oops."

"New tattoos?" she asks, and he waves his arm at her, pleased.

"Yah." Up across his biceps and the beginnings of ink on his shoulders. Hanna frowns, tilts her head, thinks about it, then accepts and moves on. Pretty much exactly what all of his family do.

"Cool. Nice. You are weird. So!" She leans in closer to her laptop screen. "Last time we managed to skype, you had met some...engineer? I do not ask in emails because I like to watch you squirm."

He taught her too well when they were kids.

She means Maia. Back when he first got to Tokyo they'd had fun; she was only posted there for a couple of weeks, then sent on to Anchorage. They met in the food queue, when she eyed his arms and asked *where on hell did you manage to get those done?*, they had a coffee together round the back of the Shatterdome, then bit each other's mouths a lot in her room.

She was on a total, messy rebound, and completely honest about it, and he had no problems going along for the ride at all. At *all*. Okay, puppy, she'd laughed. And, uhm, thanks, and he'd said thanks too, and she'd smiled and let him kiss her softly, nose her throat, slide his hands into her jumpsuit. She had luscious lips, luscious hips, a wicked laugh, and a Jaeger tattoo on her thigh he basically fanboyed all over for 20 minutes. She pulled his hair when he pushed inside her and begged him for more, which he did; she rode him on the floor and called him a pussy, and it is a depressing sign that being sniped at turned him on even more, made him grab at her hips automatically and snap his own up harder.

"Huh. Yeah. That was just..." He is not going to say *any* of that to his cousin, of course. "Brief."

Hanna *hmm*s. "O-kay." She definitely knows him too well. "So..." Her grin gets crooked. "What about that colleague you were totally in brain-love with?"

Newt scowls, looking behind his shoulder in immediate and totally crushing paranoia, like always. It's 9.30am on a Saturday morning and he's *in his room*, there is no-one there, but still, he always does that, and she always knows that he will, which is why she asks.

"Nothing," he says firmly, turning back to the screen and her amused face. "Nothing, null, nix. Ever. He is an *awful person*, and we have been talking about this for years, kid."

She shrugs, beatifically. "Indulge me."

"No, because I have explained that reality has shattered and stamped on every single illusion, for all eternity." He laughs, once, at the stupidity of everything, and rubs his eyes, then leans across to nab his shirt from the doorhandle and starts to shrug it on. "You *gotta* move on, Han. I have! Try it. Join me. It's great, here."

"Yep, yep." She rolls her eyes, but she still asks him about this *every single time* they speak. "I'm not going to forget that call from you easily. Du hattest Herzchen in den Augen, Newt. I know your faces, that was a good one, you were..." She searches for the word in English. "*Shining*."

Yep, Newt majorly regrets spilling just a bit too much personal info in one late night, excitable skype call. It was his first week in Lima, okay, he was young, a naive fool, and he'd made Hermann laugh, so Hermann had smiled at him, and Newt *hates him so much*.

"I was telling you how awful he was," he points out, buttoning up his shirt. "You *have* been *listening* every time I've explained what he's actually like, right? Not the idea you have, but the truth? Because I cannot go through all that trauma again, kid. I am scarred already."

She snorts. "Gut! Das ist gut to hear." Then she leans in close again, conspiratorial. "To me, you are like Elizabeth Bennet, complaining about Darcy."

Newt looks briefly to the crisp white ceiling, doing up his wrist cuffs, momentarily unsure whether to grin or cry. "Oh my god. Austen has *so much* to answer for."

This is a perfect example of how his cousin tends to romanticise things, which he both loves about her, and worries a little bit about. She's not naïve, just...extremely optimistic. It's a family trait, he

knows, but just because you're aware of a personal vice doesn't mean it automatically goes away, or that it needs to, merely that you can monitor it. Or accept it about yourself. Or that it is even a failing! Blind confidence and determined optimism has definitely made a lot of steps forward in science, in the past. Newt owes a lot to it. But whereas he can and will throw in scientific reasoning to everything, to balance or justify, Hanna tends to just...leap. Like falling in love immediately, which meant she got her heart broken a lot when she was a teenager, and led to some fairly awkward run ins for Newt when he visited and had to play big brother with some gangly teens he was a *lot* older than.

She moved to NY when she was 18 because her favourite aunt was from there and her cousin had moved there to study too, even though she'd never *once* been. And she thinks Newt's life now is wonderful, exciting - and it is, fuck he loves what he does, but he also spends a lot of his time tired, a bit dirty, majorly stressed about trying to save the world, and confusedly conflicted about how incredible the monsters he's trying to kill are, too. So, you know.

Perspective, kid.

"*Persuasion* is better, anyway," he points out, to get her off the scent. She swears at him, one little, middle finger with chipped nail polish, but she is laughing at him now too, openly.

"Come on! Is he *still* so bad?"

He drops his chin, and gives her a long, slow look. Flat eyed. Death eyes. "You apparently have no idea."

Hanna, on the other hand, has what he likes to call her 'dreamy eyes', and that is *exactly* the same expression she gets watching her favourite films, or whenever she gets to talk with Newt about romance novels - Mills & Boon books he will discuss, that time he read *The Kama Sutra*, no - or, whenever she sees a puppy. She's not exactly hard to read.

She presses her fingertips to her mouth briefly, in thought. "But. He is pretty?"

"Hanna. *Hanna*. He is...many things, but he is not pretty."

"Hm. I would still like to see. I will google him if you tell me which one of them he is ...". She is wheedling him. He will *not* be wheedled.

"I will disown you," he warns, trying not to laugh. "Seriously, it will be a blood vendetta. Our parents will cry. Physical and mental division. Tears and blood."

"Aunt Monika will take *my* side, you know this."

He really, unfortunately does.

Chapter End Notes

Hallo! Freut mich, Sie kennen zu lernen - Hello! I'm pleased to meet you.

Danke. Gleichfalls - Thank you, the same to you.

Du hattest Herzchen in den Augen - You had hearts in your eyes

Chapter 6

It is nearly 2018 and Hermann is a 28 year old, highly educated physics *expert*, and he has just become utterly distracted from his sushi by the pattern of Newton's freckles, cresting across his nose, dusting his cheeks, starkly obvious suddenly under the strip light in the kitchen.

This is startling.

How had he— how had he missed that for so long?

"Is that a yes?" Newton asks.

Hermann blinks at him, paused mid-way during discussion of...something. He'd missed whatever Newton said, like a pre-pubescent idiot.

He hasn't slept for 40 hours. Newton has only just come down to work, but Hermann hasn't left since *Tuesday*. He is exhausted. His thigh has been numb for four days, and his knee locked up earlier, making him jerk and smack into the edge of his desk. He is feeling...vulnerable.

"No," he decides upon, unsure what he is turning down but certain at least that it is always best to dissuade Newton from whatever he is thinking.

Newton spreads his arms wide, rocks back on his heels. "Halle-fucking-lujah! A simple answer. The world really *is* ending."

Hermann pulls a delicate face in answer, looking down to his plate.

"Did you at least allow the programme do some of the work?"

Ah. Right. The Breach-structure hypothesis model he's been working on. "Some."

Newton sighs, now. "Okay, the human brain *is* incredible, I get that, particularly ours, but machines are pretty fucking sweet too, dude." He shakes his head at Hermann, his tie barely done up, his shirt off-white, *predictable* - then suddenly grins, darts in and plucks a rice roll from Hermann's plate, the movement of his tattoos stark even through his shirtsleeves. "You can *let one* actually help you once in a while—" he starts, before ending with "Uagh!", jerking back and just managing to dodge as Hermann tries to stab him with his chopsticks.

Unfortunately.

He hisses in outrage, but Newton just throws the roll into his mouth in one go.

"Are these from the place next door?" he mumbles. With his mouth full.

"You are vile," Hermann answers. His – colleague, grins, licks his thumb clean, chews, then swallows, sticks his tongue out at him.

Hermann can think of nothing to do but make a cross with his chopsticks, leaning back in his chair. "Leave," he suggests.

"Nice." Newton laughs, and does. As he turns, chuckling, he stuffs his hands into the pockets of his stupidly tight jeans, and the edge of them pulls down – of course, everyone in *the world* could see that they were too tight – and his shirt moves, revealing the blue line of the top of his boxers. A slip of skin above with dark hair.

The jolt of lust that arcs through Hermann's gut is wild, and horribly strong, and cannot be stopped.

He turns around sharply, breathing hard, staring across the room with a furious expression – and realises that he can see himself in the reflection of the highly polished metal cupboards, opposite. But he is no longer like the boy who looked at his reflection in the window, before Vanessa came out of the bathroom, telling himself everything would be lovely, would be fine. Hermann the adult, the late 20-something, scowls at himself, ignores his hair, his knee aching, his eyes tired and his new glasses that he is *extremely annoyed* that he had to get hanging around his neck. He has a perpetual headache, an ongoing argument with his Father regarding the future of his work, a predictive model he is not completely satisfied with, and yes. He has a crush. A bloody distracting *crush*.

And it won't be lovely.

He bares his teeth at the thought of Newton— *Newton* – He has a moment, once every now and then, a foolish, pinkcheeked idea, then he forcibly moves on. It is *insane*. It will never happen.

He has too many other things to do, and Newton is not. Newton is not going to look at *him*. Ever. He's more likely to go for someone like Dietrich, which admittedly was a tiny, bubbling fear that had twisted through Hermann's brain when they'd met, a drunkenly irrational thought with an archer's paradox effect, scattering the numbers, the ideas, causing havoc with no good cause. All luck to *any* man trying to get Dietrich to look their way, the most determinedly and good naturedly heterosexual person on the planet, but Hermann is not always rational when it comes to Dr Geiszler.

He realised this quickly, about himself.

Perhaps he is only now *accepting* it.

His brain is dying. This is it, it's happening.

Newt likes to think he is finely coiled tungsten most of the time, but now he has finally done it; overloaded, overheated, and now it's *dying*, melting quickly like a kaiju corpse in front of his eyes.

Behind his eyes, wait.

He shoves his glasses up into his hair and rubs at his throbbing eyesockets, cracks his neck. Really, this is exactly how he feels every time he sits down to code and send these simulator upgrades, stretching back to the first time he decided that was a very good idea but more importantly, very *necessary*, so this nothing new. He shouldn't complain. He *isn't*, exactly, using words.

If someone were to listen, he is complaining *physically*, and also through the medium of song. This is the third time he's played *Do You Really Want To Hurt Me?*

Hermann, the only one left in the lab with him, has started twitching whenever he leans across to the speakers.

The screen still swims in front of him so he closes his eyes again, presses his fingertips to them. Behind them he can see skulls, tentacles, acid glands, long opposable tails whipping back and forth. Kilometres of cables and machines. Every update he sends makes the training better, saves more lives, kills kaiju more quickly and hopefully means there are more people still left on the ground to

come in and cut off bits of it to send to him, to play with and unpick secrets from.

Doesn't make it any easier to sort through all of his findings and translate them into programming, sure, but a goal is important, is a big, flashing light at the end of a long, dark tunnel full of broken glass through which he is metaphorically dragging himself, working on three desks concurrently, and jiggling his right leg non-stop. At least he is making definite, stubborn headway. He just needs a moment, to *think*—

Someone pokes him in the shoulder.

He cracks an eye to see Hermann, pointing a sandwich at him.

“Eat,” he says, looking at Newt down his nose, through his new, round glasses. It's still weird, seeing them on his face, though he could have bet money they would be ones with strings on them. Newt thinks he *might* like them, but he hasn't decided yet. Most pleasing is that Hermann even *inquired with Newt* about where he went for his prescription updates in Tokyo.

“So that I can avoid it like the plague,” he'd added, but Newt knew a win when he got one.

“Tell them I sent you and they'll throw in shades, for sure; they *love* me in there.”

“Because your appalling vision and inability to stop destroying your frames makes them a lot of money?”

“Because I *respect* my eyes, and go when I need to.”

“Your body is attempting to remove your ability to see,” Hermann had sniffed, as if it personally affronted *him*, “how can you possibly respect that?”

“I can't be perfect, dude. My unique and brilliant biology's gotta slip somewhere.”

“Urgh.”

Now, Newt sits up and takes the plate, frowning at Hermann. “What's this?”

“Cheese.”

Boring. Hermann ignores his little head tilt of consideration about whether this suits him right now, whether this is really going to be the first thing he wants after...huh, 10 hours, leaning in to see his screen instead. He's still squinting at computers, habitually, before realising that he doesn't actually need to anymore. As Newt watches, giving in and cramming half of the sandwich in his mouth, Hermann moves back from the screen a careful half-inch to a normal distance, then continues to look over Newt's coding, briefly running a fingertip along the rim of his glasses self-and-yet-also-*un*-consciously.

Ladies and gentlemen, one of the leading physics brains in the world, Newt reminds himself, taking in the chalk dust on his jacket, the mixture of flat and sticking up hair behind his left ear, and the fact that he is still forgetting that he has plastic and glass *on his own face*.

It's almost as stupid as the fact that Newt still, on occasion, finds this all unbearably *sexy*.

“Is that a double-helix simulation?” Hermann murmurs.

“Yeah.” Newt leans sideways to get his bottle of aloe-vera drink from the other desk - fuck he *loves* these, gets them in town and stocks up the fridge with them. They're sort of...chewy.

Vitamins, nutrients, like plant food. There's something so deliciously weird about it, he feels like he's modifying his genetics with every mouthful. When he swigs from the bottle it's gone warm and thick now, unfortunately, ew.

"Yeah," he says again, swallowing thickly. Hermann waits for him, for once. "The simulator needs quicker reaction time, it's way behind in terms of pivoting ability, they haven't factored in tails properly at *all*. I'm adding my rotational evaluation this time - that will add to the reach and reflex they can program in."

Hermann raises his eyebrows. "You did that *already*?"

"Last week."

His lab partner is totally impressed. "...Well."

Newt grins, takes another bite, chews, and watches Hermann.

"The shape of this is..." His voice trails off. His mouth has gone a little slack, watching it. On occasion, good programming has this effect on Hermann that is not unlike drugs, like he can *see* something beyond just the screen, that is totally fascinating to Newt.

"Hey." He realises something, after a moment of observation; his tastebuds reminding him of something pertinent. "I don't remember you having cheese in the fridge."

Brown eyes flick sideways, then back at the screen.

"I don't."

He— Newt *cackles*, surprised, and pleased. "You *thief*! Good work, dude. Whose is it?"

Hermann shrugs.

"And you abuse *me*."

"Because you have no shame about it. I feel desperately awful." Hermann straightens up. "But needs must." He looks pointedly at Newt, then not very subtly at his watch.

It's 3.06 am, Newt could have told him if he'd asked, he checked 9 minutes ago. He yawns in response, yeah I *know*, his jaw clicking, and then the biological imperative for a *wicked* stretch rushes up him, so he follows the impulse: eyes closed, arms over his head, back arched, the *works*. He jams his glasses back on before he opens his eyes, tugging at his tie where it's too tight around his throat, reaches for his drink again and pauses.

Hermann is watching him, mouth parted.

"...What?" he asks.

Hermann flinches back, adjusts his glasses again, and then scowls.

"You. Look awful."

"Thanks dude." Newt gives him a thumbs up, goes for a drink, then pauses, bottle at his lips. "I have *noticed* that this is the third time you've stayed up whilst I do these, you know."

Hermann goes a little pink-white on the cheeks, and opens his mouth - to complain, probably, so Newt continues, cutting him off with the inevitable rant he *doesn't have time for right now*

Hermann, waving the bottle. "I mean, if you're *that* worried that I'll get an equation wrong, you could just tell me."

Hermann looks down at his cane, taps it once on the floor, and then lifts his chin with his eyebrow raised.

"Why waste words on what we both already know?" he hisses, smiles horribly, and wanders away again to fiddle with papers or whatever it is he is doing in his corner. He's nervous about his predictive model, he keeps going over it and over it, Newt knows. Joe's been moved to Alaska now, too, their team shrunk, so maybe Hermann's taken on some of his old work. Hard to say. Newt has had his head essentially stuck in this programme for 2 days and when he's done, he will be overseeing everything he can that Joe left, but he can't think about it now. He has to get *this* right, it's so, so important. He can't make mistakes.

He digs his blunt nails into his palms, slaps both of his cheeks a couple of times to startle himself, come *on* fight or flight instinct, bloodrush, *adrenaline* - and carries on.

An hour later, he hits send, and headdesks his worksurface.

"Yeeeeeah," he breathes, lifting his fists above his head in silent triumph, then slumps.

"Good god, it's a miracle." Hermann is back, immediately, snippy but surprisingly low voice hovering around behind Newt's head somewhere. He leans across and turns the music off abruptly with a snap, his arm brushing the back of Newt's shoulders. Silence wobbles in the space behind, bright and clean. Newt feels weirdly blissful. "I was about to go insane," Hermann mutters.

Newt gives him another thumbs-up over his head.

Hermann coughs, waits, then nudges him with his foot when he doesn't respond. "*Newton*."

He grunts.

"I am going to bed. I can lock you up in here if you wish but I dread the sight of you in the morning."

"Ohhh, *nice*." He huffs, lifts his head, tips and slumps backwards in his chair so far that he can look at Hermann upside down instead. "You are horrible."

"I am not, and I strongly suggest that you sleep as well," Hermann counters. "The bags under your eyes have become canyons."

"You want me out, you'll have to carry me."

Hermann goes pinched, pursing his lips, which looks hilarious from this angle. Newt used to do this a lot when he was younger, on the couch or his bed or just the floor, his feet above his head, toes going slowly cold as he watched the world go by. It was great when he'd been studying or reading too long - get the blood flowing, get his brain throbbing, re-juice it, feed it.

That, or jerking off. Both have their different uses, both are great, and obviously one he does a lot more now that he is a mature, responsible adult. He could have done *that* already tonight to wake himself up, in desperation, but a) he's not alone, though the idea of just getting his dick out with Hermann here is hilarious, hilariously sad, and hilariously a weird turn-on, but b) no, contrary to popular belief, he does *not sexually pleasure himself in the lab*.

"You know very well that I cannot lift *you* anywhere," Hermann says, looking away for a second.

Even the slightest possible innuendo in a situation seems to make him uncomfortable, still, as if Newt had just stood up on a table and shouted ‘THIS COULD POTENTIALLY BE AN INTERCOURSE REFERENCE’ at him. Prudes have no fun, seriously.

“Pff,” is what he says, eloquently, and scratches his belly. “Bullshit. You can bitch but I have *seen* you hefting computers about.” *I am observant*, he wants to sing, or stick a sign on his forehead, *I literally have a super brain*. People always thinks he *misses* things. “I’m a lean, tiny fighting machine. It’ll be easy.” He lifts both arms, reaching up like a child. Maybe it’s a little desperate. It is impossible to get Hermann to touch you without annoying the shit out of him first, and that’s fun and all, but he is *tired*. Whine.

Hermann rolls his eyes, looks at the blank computer screen again. Thoughts run across his face, then alight in the slight raising of his eyebrow, the pursing of his lips. Idea, equation, endpoint. He looks back at Newt.

“In actual fact.” He squares his shoulders, taps his cane on the floor again. “If you wouldn’t mind, I...could use a little assistance myself.”

Fuck. Newt sits up, spins round. “What’s up?”

Hermann just touches his thigh, barely brushing the fabric of his grey slacks with his fingertips. “I’m a little, ah... uncomfortable.”

Newt thought he’d been okay all day, moving around smoothly, even if he did have his cane. Maybe he just missed the signs. The data.

“Oh, crap. Okay.” He jumps up, then stops, leans back to grab his keycard from the wall. “I’ll lock up.”

Hermann takes his shoulder and leans on it stiffly all the way back to their corridor. The elevator ride could possibly have been unbearably strange and fidgetty and close, but he asks Newt to describe his helix model when the doors slide closed, and Newt really gets into that, words coming fast, steady, then slow by the end. Hermann follows everything, perfectly, he hopes. His fingers tap occasionally along with the description against Newt’s collarbone, which he obviously doesn’t realise he’s doing, but Newt is not going to say anything because it makes his stomach leap and also feels really nice, soothing, grounding.

Fuck he really *is* exhausted now.

Hermann nods his thanks at his door, then shuts it firmly.

Newt totters back to his room, jittery, convinced that he will be unable to sleep now. He does a circuit of the space four times, rubs his face, yanks his tie off, kicks his pants off, and then gives up and slides his hand into his boxers, kneeling on his bed. He curls and strokes his fingers along and back, tight around his dick which was ready, so so *ready* for this, already heavy, hot, his balls already tight, the head slippery from the *thought*—

After, he passes out face-down in bed, still mostly fully clothed.

The next morning, he’s blearily washing his face at his sink, his door propped open to get some air through. Hermann passes on his way to the lab and he tiptoes over, leans out of his door to check on him once he’s passed – only to see that Hermann has paused to look in on him, too. They catch each other leaning back to see.

Newt starts and grins, embarrassed.

“Hey,” he says, slinging the towel around his neck.

“Morning,” Hermann says. His glasses are on the end of his nose. Newt goes to say something – he’s not sure what – when his neighbour, Simon, comes out of his room, locking it with a flourish, whistling. He waves to them both as he passes - Simon is basically a Labrador – so Newt waves back, and when he glances back at Hermann, his lab partner simply gives him a nod.

“I shall see you later,” he says, raises a long fingered hand in some sort of strange greeting-slash-acknowledgement-thing, then walks onward.

Newt nods, nods, and ducks back indoors, but watches him go down the corridor through the gap in the hinges, just in case. Hermann hits the elevator button with his elbow, gets in, spins and faces forward, just looking up to the ceiling as the doors close. He seems to be moving perfectly well today, albeit with his cane. He looks fine.

Huh. Newt must have really helped him.

He feels really good about that, and weird; sort of, achey, all in the sternum, in his belly, before he unexpectedly falls asleep again when he sits down to put his shoes on, and dreams things that are warm, and far away.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I am sorry, but also, not sorry. :D

German Translations

Verdammt - damn/fuck

Gott, du bist ein Scheißkerl - God, you are a bastard

Und - And

natürlich - naturally

Himmelschundzwirn - literally, 'Heaven-ass-and-twine'

IKCHEN IS A GOD among German translators and my new Queen <33

Hermann decides, pertinently, over a cup of strong black coffee and Karla's latest email full of her wedding plans and gushing joy at her work in the research department at the TU, that enough is enough. He accepts a longstanding invitation to fly to London for Christmas with Vanessa and *her* family, instead of his own, like he has for the last few years.

Bastien calls him as soon as he lands at Heathrow; he's barely turned his phone back on and his little brother's snide face appears on screen.

"Yes?" he answers, carefully, when he has successfully traversed the metal steps of the airplane with his bag and cane, and is back on the ground.

Bastien is already shouting, in a tangled mix of German and English which is normal for him - he's not the kind of person to care if people speak all the languages he uses or not. It is simply your job to *keep up*.

He also doesn't bother with hello, of course. "—Fuck, I mean *Verdammt*, Hermann, I cannot *believe* that you have chosen her over us this year! Dietrich's over there with Mum but Father had expected to see you and so now *I'll* have to listen to him talk about defense and science, *Gott, du bist ein Scheißkerl*—"

"Jealousy is unbecoming," he interrupts, climbing into the airport shuttle. "Just because your friends are all media idiots does not give you an excuse to complain." He hangs up.

Bastien calls back, almost immediately.

"—*Und* I have this new job to tell you about, you are not showing a vested interest in my development—"

"Mother and I both sent you notes on your article *yesterday*!"

Bastien blows a raspberry down the phone. "That was nothing, I am talking about *real* reporting, they won't let me anywhere near PPDC cases with our surname, all my editor does is mutter 'allegations of nepotism' at me and direct me to different things—"

“Understandable, we all know how poor you would be at undercover work,” he agrees.

“—And I can’t get anything out of Father, *natürlich*, so they give me topics to cover like reef destruction. *Reef destruction*, Hermann. Do I look like I give a shit about dolphins? *Himmelarschundzwirn*, I want to write about *kaiju*!”

“You cared when you did that science project on solar communication.” Hermann steps off the humid bus and into the airport building, hit with another wall of heat after chilly air outside, and begins the inevitable journey, following the masses towards passport control, whilst attempting to unzip his coat, use his cane, and trap the phone between his ear and shoulder at the same time.

“Bah! That was during puberty, nothing I did during puberty should be taken seriously. I did it all for girls.”

“Yah, Bastien, which is at least some explanation for your lack of fully developed social skills.”

Vanessa meets him at arrivals and wraps him up in a hug, her long arms tight around him. She smells divine, like always, and laughs at his hair, like always. He touches a strand of hers, carefully. She’s let it grow long, in its natural spiral curls, which is how he likes it best.

He pushes the luggage cart, and she links her arm with his.

“Bastien already called you?” she asks, and laughs when he rolls his eyes. “I got an email this morning.”

“Oh, no.”

“Don’t worry! I can handle little brothers.” She has three, to be fair. “I’ve been handling him for a while now, too, remember?”

They climb into her car and she puts her driving glasses on; they have bright red frames. He loves them, though he could never wear them himself, and compliments her on them.

“You notice my *glasses*,” she says, fondly.

“Of course,” he says, confused. She kisses his cheek before she starts the car.

They catch up on the way back to Brixton, rehashing things she knows because he has told her already, but she likes to hear things from his mouth, directly, to watch him as he speaks. She always made him repeat hypotheses at University, then made him to listen to hers. It was useful for both of them. Newton does this, too, except Newton makes him justify every single detail, probes him for more information, makes some bizarre comment or suggestion which occasionally turns the whole thing upside down, inside out, and illuminates something new - and then he *will* insist on squirming, physically *squirming* away when Hermann barrels across the lab to talk about it with him, intrigued. As if it’s a huge problem to explain his own ideas using actual *science and reasoning*, rather than gestures and glee, just *far* too much effort, when usually he was the one who bloody *started it*.

Vanessa’s mother clasps Hermann to her bosom as if she hasn’t seen him for twenty years, not two, totally heedless of his discomfort - in fact, more amused by it than anything. She does let him go and does nothing more than pat his shoulder for the rest of his stay, at least. She remembers enough of his character, then.

He’s got the tiny guest room all to himself, Vanessa’s youngest brothers relegated to the sofa, which he tries to protest against but is fairly loudly shot down.

“Just agree,” Michael, Vanessa’s dad tells him, leaning in as if this is a conspiracy. “Trust me.”

Christmas dinner is insanely busy; a warm, flavourful, bizarre mix of Caribbean and British staples on the table that strikes him, as he sits down, as the sort of thing that one Dr Geiszler would likely adore. He sits on the end, next to Vanessa, her Father on the other side, and around them her brothers and sister-in-law and nieces get up, sit down, move around, chat raucously, whilst her mother piles more food onto his plate. He eats mince pies, fried sweet plantain, butternut squash mash, beans, brussel sprouts, chicken, turkey, Yorkshire puddings – Vanessa’s favourite – and more.

Vanessa’s money from modelling has more than paid off the debts from University that she racked up, even with her scholarship to Cambridge, and perhaps it’s that which has given her this new level of ease, a freedom of movement and calmness that he notices in her right away. She is *happier*. She is working in the King’s research department, and modelling when she needs to, and she often lays her hand on his arm whilst she’s talking, intimate, close, and calm. He carefully fills her Father in on his work when asked, and when he glances sideways, she is watching him, chin in her hand. She grins at him, all white teeth and the little gap in the front two. He cannot help but smile a little back.

The wine is helping, definitely.

In the past Vanessa could, on occasion, come off as gangly – or so he’s told, at least; he only ever saw her as bright, intelligent, and hilarious – but not anymore. He loosens, too, somehow. Slowly, but it happens. By the time he wobbles up to bed he feels looser, more relaxed, than he has for months. No-one pays him much mind, here, he’s just. One of a crowd.

Boxing Day, Vanessa confuses his jetlag ever more by waking him up early, tiptoeing into his room and tugging the arm of his pyjamas, and they slip out for a walk up to Streatham common. The traffic has that eerie quiet it only gets over Christmas, fog disguising the clock at the top of the Town Hall, blurring the edges of the high street. As they walk, he has to work to keep up with her long legs.

It’s snowing, a little. Nothing on Garmisch, of course, the flakes are fairly pathetic in comparison, but it *is* bloody cold. He wraps his new, thick blue scarf tighter around his neck – his present from Vanessa – and they trudge across the icy grass of the common together, determinedly, arms linked, his cane skidding on occasion. Every time it happens he hisses in frustration, and she just laughs.

“So, how’s work *really*?” she asks, after 15 minutes of companionable silence.

“Fine.”

She raises a strong eyebrow. “Fine is unacceptable, Hermann, fine has variable definitions.”

“I do realise that you are quoting that awful film at me,” he scowls.

“Sorry.” She isn’t. Her youngest brother has made her watch the entirety of the Star Trek repertoire, from the 20th century and more, and Vanessa can and will inflict it on Hermann whenever possible, particularly as she knows that the muggy science makes him flinch. Karla also does this, as her fiancé is a fan as well. Karla is a lot easier to ignore, however. She just sends him sad faces in emails when he does.

Vanessa will call him and *shout at him*.

“What I mean is,” she clarifies, “you agreed to come and stay with my family again, which, after

the last time when my Grandmother wouldn't stop pinching your knee and you started so hard you smacked both elbows on the table and sent that fork flying, I thought you would *never do* again."

"It was not *that* bad."

"It really was." She grins.

They are nearing a bench; he makes for it. "I required a change of scenery."

"No shit."

He snorts, and sits heavily, sticking his leg out in front of him. Vanessa crowds on next to him, sitting sideways, staring into his face. He raises an eyebrow. "Yes?"

She pokes him, hard, in the upper arm. "What is going *on*? Your Dr. *Geiszler* finally drive you to distraction?"

"He is not *my* anything," he snaps, and she leans back, surprised.

Pause.

"...*Scheiße*."

She raises an eyebrow again. "I knew it. He *is* pretty."

Hermann sighs, laughs desperately, and then covers his face with his hands.

"I *also* knew there was a reason you never invited me to Tokyo." She is pouting. "Dietrich's been all...weirdly smug, in his emails. Not that that's unusual, he has his ways, but I bloody *knew* something was going on with you and he wouldn't say anything."

"I didn't invite you to Lima, either," he points out, lifting his head.

She looks at him carefully, her startlingly coloured eyes gentle, though narrowed. "You are a prick," she finally decides, and smacks him in the arm.

"*Ouch*, Vanessa! Please. Decorum."

She decides to forgo that entirely. "So you fancy him? Want to make filthy brainlove with him?" Hermann opens his mouth, then closes it, appalled. She grins, then her smile softens. "...Hermann. What's happened?"

"Oh, the usual." He crosses his legs, carefully. "Inane ridiculousness at every turn, the sheer idiocy of him – I've described enough, I think?" She *hmm*s, nodding. "And lo, the inevitable decline of my sanity into..." *His bright, shining mind, his expressive hands*. He looks away, across the common, clears his throat. "He has green eyes."

"Oh." She shifts, leans down to play with a buckle on her boot. "Huh. Bollocks."

"Yes." He sighs, again, rubs at his face, pulls his glasses out from underneath his scarf and puts them on.

"Does he..." She trails off, then makes a complicated and disgusting body movement that makes him laugh despite himself.

"I'm fairly certain he's open-minded." There'd been a willowy tech in Lima, sticking her head into

the lab with a smile, and then in Tokyo, not long before he left, a heavily tattooed man waiting outside the dome with a coffee that he'd seen Newton basically skip up to - though perhaps that was his artist? But a year or so before, he had definitely seen one of the medical staff tiptoeing past his door at 4am with his shoes in his hands. "He is not what one would call 'picky'."

"So? What's the big problem? Get in there!"

"Vanessa!"

"What, *Hermann*?"

"It is not that simple."

"Attraction is fairly simple, honey." She twists and sits next to him properly, crosses her own legs, like him, slumping down until she is comfortable. "Listen to the part-time model, here, I've become a bit of an expert in this field."

"I am not his type, I can assure you."

She smacks him again. "You're everyone's type. They just don't...know it."

"Charming."

"And you said he isn't picky - you do realise you're contradicting yourself, now?"

"To a point. I'm not." He adjusts his scarf; this is possibly the most uncomfortable conversation they've ever had, and that includes when he felt he owed it to her to tell her *I'm 99% sure that I'm gay* and she'd said *No shit, Sherlock*. He considers what he can see, for a moment. The mist is lifting as the sun fights its way higher, the ice melting from the leaves and grass around them to sparkling dew. An old man passes, walking an enormous husky dog, and nods politely toward them. "We could not *be* more different. He likes...expressive people. Demonstrative. Fairly *unlike* me."

Vanessa wraps an arm around his shoulders and lays her head against his, using his scarf as a pillow. "Look, do you want to shag him, or marry him?"

"I'm... The first one." He fidgets. She squeezes him, to keep him still. "But it is *not* worth exploring," he clarifies. "Trust me. Nothing but disaster ahead."

"I say try. What've you got to lose?"

"My dignity, my workspace, my job, my mind..."

She chuckles, throatily.

A spatter of drops fall on them from the tree above, in the wind, and he wipes his forehead clean.

"You've been talking about him for 3 years and all I'd ever taken from it is how ridiculous he is," Vanessa says after a moment, wonderingly. "I should have got that you *fancy* him. You don't complain about anyone this much, even Dietrich, and I know you love him more than me."

"Impossible." The answer is quick, unconscious, true. She squeezes him again.

"I vote go for it." She sits up suddenly, and looks at him. "Come on. It'll be good for you! Fuck out the tension, or just...fuck." She grins, widely, repeating the word because of the way he half-closes his eyes in disgust, a little embarrassment, and a fair amount judgement. "Fuck a *lot*," she adds.

“You need a wider vocabulary.”

She laughs, her head tipped back, and then grabs his elbow. “Come on. Let’s find a greasy spoon. One’s bound to be open *somewhere*.”

He protests, massively, but actually rather enjoys his eggs and sausages in the end.

When Hermann lands back in Tokyo, he has almost completely made up his mind. He has considered and considered the other viewpoint. He has never been one for...casual sex, but as Vanessa said: It’s fine. Perhaps. Why not? He’s almost thirty, he can try something new. Either way, he cannot continue in the same direction, so he will simply...suggest something. Food, a drink. God knows Newton will go along with almost any social situation that is offered to him, more than happily, and Hermann is not *incapable* of instigating or enjoying social situations. He is not his little brother.

Not to mention that he really - and what better time to be honest with yourself than on a red-eye flight with a glass of scotch and a moronic film that he is not paying attention to and the man next to him snoring, audible even through his *headphones* - it is true that he really does need to slide his hands up inside one of Newton’s stupid t-shirts and mouth his poorly shaven throat before he goes totally, screamingly insane.

He thinks about it, further, glancing at the date on his tablet-- the *date*. 19th January.

Newton’s birthday.

Without allowing himself to think about it too much, Hermann opens his laptop, and willingly creates some sort of...suggestion, in the emailed birthday greeting that he creates, very carefully. It’s about as obvious as he can be. Which is to say, not. But it’s something. Enough of a step for him that Newton should see it.

He’ll just let the results unfold. Look, then leap. A...New year’s resolution, as it were, and perhaps, as long as Newton is willing and does not turn him down with mild confusion and probably hysteria, and is in fact amenable to the idea Hermann has subtly posited through art-form and suggestion, Hermann can get rid of this...problem, and they can return to being colleagues, and he can go back to his own research with a blissfully clear, re-organised head.

He feels strangely better after sending the e-card. Ridiculous, but set.

As soon as he gets back to the base, however, Newton is leaving.

Off to New York for two weeks, see ya dude!

Hermann had not seen that coming. He hadn’t predicted Newton to take any leave for another few months at least; it’s uncharacteristic, for him. Spontaneous in the normal manner, yes, but being as he is in the middle of some fairly detailed research on kaiju DNA and has only just sent his most recent updates to the main simulator team, in usual circumstances this would spur him onto *more* work. It is...strange.

Hermann stands stiffly in the corridor for a moment, shocked, after Newton passes him with a shout of farewell and a bag slung over his shoulder. No mention of, no understanding of... Hermann nods once, and moves on toward his room.

This is a sign from above. Definitely. Hermann is not an idiot. It was an idea so poor that a higher power has stepped in. He didn’t get it, he didn’t- *respond*.

Hypothesis utterly disproven.

At least he'll get some peace, for a while, he reasons.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

German translations

behämmert - screwy

Newt has a quiet 28th birthday, mostly because he actually *forgets* – he and whichever members of the team didn't take holiday over xmas are making headway on a project he has proposed and by the time he lifts his head from leaning over a workstation to look around, it's just about Jan 20th.

“Woops,” he says, when he opens his personal email and there are 10 messages from his parents and Hanna and friends from back home flashing colours at him. There is also one from Hermann, which only came through an hour before. No, Newt will never *ever* regret hacking into Hermann's personnel file back in Lima to find out his birthdate and then bug him about it. This has become a tradition of theirs. None of the normal e-cards for them. No *no*. Instead, find and create the worst thing you can picture, and triple it.

He opens the email, preparing himself. It's a photograph of *The Thinker*, by Rodin. The naked, thoughtful dude is mulling shit over as normal, but with the addition of a colourful pirate hat and a plate of food in front of him. It looks like carrots, Newt can't tell.

There's an addendum:

Happy Birthday, Newton.

Perhaps one evening next week?

Newt thinks, not much for a white second. Then he thinks, hey. *Hey*, woah, is that. Is that a date offer?

Holy shit, holy *shit*—

Then he thinks again. Thinks, You fucking moron. Hermann's been trying to discuss philosophy with him for months, and Newt has been ignoring him, not because he doesn't want to or can't, but because it's more fun to watch all the various, awkward ways in which Hermann tries to get Descartes and Locke and Plato into conversation, casually, and fails. So here, he's very obviously suggesting that Newt actually *sit and consider* his actions more. Right. Because Hermann is a bitch. Not the sort of person who would ever suggest losing clothing in e-form - *honestly* - and the way his heart is still thudding with his pulse having jumped up into his *ears* at the mere, wild thought that Hermann might actually have been showing an interest kind of pisses him off at himself. Oof. *Older, better, faster, stronger?* Newt tells himself, shakes his head, and decides he really needs to take a break.

He goes to the main dome and sits with his legs dangling over the edge of a walkway, which is possibly stupid because he's a little shaky, adrenaline hissing and draining away, but hey. Below him the skeleton staff scuttle about like ants.

He tries to read his book but can't concentrate. His eyes skim text and blur, his knee bouncing. Then Kong, his new tablet, *pings* at him - Kong, now, because Godzilla packed up a few months before in a heartwrenching end of bluescreen and then smoke which he's not over yet. Kong is *sweet*, at least. He's made a few modifications already, and bribed Hermann before Xmas with fruit cake from the expat. heaven supermarket a few streets away, into making a couple more.

This email is new. It's a notification from his dad that Hanna's graduation ceremony has finally had the date set, months after she actually finished, for early February. Short notice *and* the most expensive time possible for him to fly - so they know he won't be able to make it, but don't worry, don't feel bad, it's okay, and Gunter will probably send him 100,000 pics whether he asks for them or not.

Newt puts his tablet down, looks down the gap between his knees at the floor, 100ft below him, then nods and smacks himself on the forehead with his paperback. Fuck that. Fuck *this*. Time to whup himself into action. This is a final, massive straw. This is the final straw whacking him in the *crotch*. New Year, new resolution - yep, Newt, do it. Get the fuck outta Tokyo for a bit before you lose your *behämmert* mind trying not to stare at one of the most inexplicably attractive men you have ever met. Because yeah, no, no he has *not* been able to get over the desire to touch Hermann a lot. It's really only gotten worse. Normally Newt would go for it, he would have gone for it *months* ago like a tenacious, sensual beast, but Hermann is not the kind of person to appreciate that. To appreciate Newt's...specific appeal. The thought of Dr. Gottlieb (Jr.), esquire, expert, and resident prissy old man *ever* wanting Newt all up on him is just insanely improbable. It's a statistical and social misnomer, and here's Newt, having really missed him over Christmas - on the one hand, his very unique company that Newt has apparently become *desensitised* to, but on the other, wanting to basically dryhump him in the decontamination showers like he cannot even *describe*.

Last year they both got pretty drunk on brandy at the enforced mid-December meal all of the vaguely Christian calendar-following staff had organised, a weird affair in the mess hall, and had to steer each other back to their shared corridor. They'd argued about which of them was actually giddy, and which was supporting, and okay Newt had privately thought he looked adorable with his ruddy cheeks, but hadn't wanted to *lick* them like he does now.

Or had he.

Maybe he had.

But. Hermann is skittish, old-fashioned, wound up tight and *proper*, and Newt is. Not. He's not having an existential crisis, he is completely *great* with how he is, he worked hard to get here *but* he also knows enough social cues to know when people are not interested, when people are completely bemused by him but little else. He's thought about it, sure. He's thought about it, a lot, he's got close, he's imagined - particularly over New Year's, with Hermann over in London visiting his British ladyfriend and Newt at the lock-in party at the bar where Aki, his favourite barmaid ever, made him do the coaster-glasses-physics trick again for everyone else. She rolled her eyes and kissed him at the peak of the countdown with champagne sticky lips because he finally managed to convince her after a very detailed explanation that it was his native custom, and she should be respectful, maybe? He basically *wore her down*, but Hermann... Hermann is a *stone*. Hermann is a big, monolithic stone, and Newt is made of wild, distractable waves, with a wider ocean to explore - plenty more fish, foam, spray, don't even *think* about tackling that one. Even broaching the subject is a terrible plan that will destroy any 'working relationship' they've managed to carve out with blood, sweat and angry tears.

Newt may be a base creature but he has a mind, and his mind says, No. *Do not fuck this up*.

Hermann makes him *work*, work better, and it's struck him over a fairly quiet Christmas, working in the lab without him for the first time in over 2 years, that it might be the most satisfying working relationship that he's ever had.

What the *fuck* is his life?

He books the first flight he can. It leaves (just about) the next day. He goes to pack without replying to any emails, other than to warn his parents that he's coming.

Hermann comes back the early morning Newton leaves. They pass in the corridor, and Newt gives him a high five, or, goes at him with a high five and Hermann flinches, blinks, hand lifting more as protection and still in the air after Newt passes, calling over his shoulder that he'll see him in a couple of weeks.

He is not *fleeing*; it's a tactical removal. Strategic re-arrangement.

The genius equivalent of adjusting himself in his jeans so subtly that no-one notices.

Everything appears to be basically exactly the same, anyway. Possibly. Hermann's a couple of pounds heavier, which Newt notices, glancing back over his shoulder as he rounds the corner. It doesn't make a huge difference. Only a biologist would have noticed. Maybe Vanessa's a good cook. It suits him. And no, no, she's not his *ladyfriend*, per se, not like that - Newt is pretty certain of this, especially after the only email he's actually needed to send to Dietrich, one he fired off to just, just check in case he put his foot in it super badly before Hermann left, not really wanting to rock the boat *too* much there with an accidental reference just in case she's like some unrequited, tender love or something, which he can completely respect if so because that would suck. And yes, because he was curious, he is desperately, burningly *curious* because Hermann's not had so much as a kiss, to his knowledge, in the *whole time they've worked together* which is in-fucking-sane. But then who knows, the man has hidden depths, maybe he's off in BDSM clubs every other week choking people with his glasses strings. He'd been humming an Elvis song the other day and nearly gave Newt a heart attack, when he walked by the pile of papers that is his desk and heard him from somewhere inside them.

"...My sister is a fan," is all he'd share, fiddling with his ID badge and then lifting his chin at Newt's intrigue. Newt knows a story when he sees one, though. There is more information to extrapolate, there.

The response from Dietrich to Newt's question had been similarly concise – *brothers* - but with a little more emphasis than Hermann's.

Newt,

Good to hear from you! Re your question:

HA

NO.

- *D.*

Newt loves Dietrich already, so much. Hermann is a poor *shadow* of that guy, who also, by the way, has a much better haircut. And *no*, come to think of it, Newt is still *not* completely convinced that what he originally thought about Hermann's, that it was the poorly grown out remnant of some techpunk Berlin club phase, *isn't*, in fact. You know. *The poorly grown out remnant of some techpunk Berlin club phase.*

He might ask Dietrich to confirm or dismiss that, next. Maybe he tried out the ones Newt was going to in the US, maybe they had the same weird rave phase in the UK that happened to him, or maybe Hermann went when he did that study at TU Berlin, too, because apparently some time at Cambridge wasn't enough – and maybe Newt has a lot of degrees but at least he did them all in *one place*. Maybe it was one of those shallow echoes of the early '90s raves across Europe that no-one attending those ones a decade later would *actually have experienced*, like his were. Nothing original or unique. Copies, not clones.

Newt had gone along with some of that oddly placed nostalgia people got post-graduation, but it was his students who had it, not him - that wasn't really an excuse he could use, already on his fifth and sixth PhD simultaneously by then. He just really liked the music and the company. The frenetic, heavy scratch of the beatline. But anyway, no, it's not necessarily that he really thinks Hermann did that, not *actually*. The man has probably never danced to anything but the glee at his own findings, ever. It's moreso that Newt is a masochist. Obviously. A stupid, brilliant, awful masochist who likes girls and boys with (almost) bigger brains than him and hips you can grab, either hips lush enough to really hold or slim enough to span with his fingers, so he can rub his thumbs over the soft jut of hipbones, and grip, and yes he likes to torment himself with the idea of this. Just a notion. Morbid curiosity. It's said that in his files for years. He is a bundle of instincts and contradiction. He just likes to imagine, or *know*.

Things he wants to know:

In some infinite other branch of their lives, what would that have been like? In a club, maybe in Berlin. Could they have met? Would Herman have *noticed* him? Would they have danced, or just, just bumped into each other, disorientated in the strobe lights and smoke, pressing up against each other in a crowd, their t-shirts damp with sweat, sticky shoulders, sticky *hands*— and why is it coming back and back to his thoughts over again, when he's the only one in the lab, sitting at his station and staring up at *that fucking picture from Lima*. That fucking picture. Most of the people in it have been moved around the world into new positions, split up, except him and Hermann. Somehow, their various bosses have noticed that they work well together as well, and have left them there. Outsider's perspective and all. Not fair, how was he supposed to *know*? To expect that? Tapping his foot against the floor, jiggling, thinking, thinking, trying to decide what to try next with the sample in front of him, thinking about that. He only has a tiny part of the DNA from what he has sequenced, from what samples he has, and it's not *enough* to give him anything new. *Something* new. Something old? Coming in at 6am a month before to find Hermann standing perfectly still at his chalkboards, again, hands in front of him as his eyes sweep over the equations and lines, moving his fingers slightly like he's conducting a symphony, or he can see shapes that Newt cannot.

Something borrowed: memorably, Hermann asleep on the couch in the corner with a book open, flat over his face. The spine of it very creased. One of *Newt's* books. The Hitchhiker's Guide.

Something blue? Newton's *balls*, ohgod.

See how it has moved, over time, from a joke, to a consideration, to fixation, to some stupidly appealing *need*—

So Newt really.

Newt should really take a break.

A decent distraction. And clear his mind. Definitely.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

German translations

jute Letze - Good idea

Wie schlecht ist das denn, ich bin nicht den ganzen Weg hierher gekommen, nur um auf dich zu warten! - What the fuck is this, I didn't come all this way to wait for you!

So, na das ist definitiv neu, aber eigentlich sollte uns nichts, was du bist, noch überraschen - Well, this is new, but nothing that you are should surprise us anymore.

Mein Schatz, Mein wunderhübscher Schatz! - My treasure, my beautiful treasure

Newton sends Hermann a reply to his...suggestion, from what can only have been in the taxi on his way to the airport. Hermann gets it as he's unpacking, slowly, in his room.

He is surprised to see anything after so fast an exit, then he is cautious, then— ah. Resigned.

ok you know what - I could 100% sit & ponder life far bEtter + 4 longer than you, just some of us choose to actually have a life outSIDE of work, thanx

happy New Year tho :)

See you in 2 wkss

Which is... Fine.

Fine.

Hermann is oddly *relieved*.

Vanessa emails two days after he's settled back into Tokyo life, and what is an immediately apparent and stunningly peaceful absence of one Dr Geiszler.

SO?????

Though quietly touched by her optimism, he is, at the same time, baffled. He replies summarily.

*Please disregard my momentary lapse in sanity and judgement at the very beginning of this year.
Let us never discuss it again.*

The reply comes immediately.

*HERMANN if you did not get **some** I will fly there myself and slap you, what the f**k*

He appreciates, once again, the fact that the PPDC server continues to work to block email addresses that use banned words, though of course, there is the part of him that thinks that they really ought to be spending that money on better things. Better security, for one. He's posited upgrades a *number* of times. That and coming up with a way to allow people to get into inboxes

and retrieve emails that they have sent, if they think that they might want to amend the punctuation slightly, or the font, or the layout, or delete the entire thing from history, or if they then fret enormously over them for a few hours, until deciding bodily to give up and advancing into the next stage of the process...

Determined apathy.

He truly does *not* want to discuss any of this by email, now. Written evidence is appallingly traceable, were someone to hack into his own inbox in the above manner.

He writes back to Vanessa with a code they've been using since University.

[Please do not refer to it so blatantly. I changed my mind. He has taken 2 weeks holiday in NY.]

Her next reply is a little slower, extremely short, and when he sees it he hates himself for the rush of fondness he has for the fact that she actually uses code to type out *interjections*.

[Hmfmf!]

Dietrich does the same as this - all of his emails are full of too many vowels sounds and 'thoughtful' consonants. He's been using their code to make reference to Newton for *months*. Relentlessly. *Exempli gratia*:

- how is your colleague -
- you know which one, the only one I care to hear about -
- I like him, I should buy him something to reward him for working with you -
- are you still fixated like a burnished eyed sea-eagle on an extra wriggly fish -
- no I will not cease and desist emailing you OR Vanessa -
- you say he plays guitar? I bet he rocks out well, Bruder, *wriggly*, yah? -
- does he like chocolate, maybe?
- have you given up and attacked him with your lips yet? I assume that is how you kiss -
- I may have a very slow heart attack and die in drawn out, incremental stages which I will ask Karla to photograph and document if you do not start living more excitingly soon -

Et cetera, et cetera.

Hermann has come to ignore around 24.2% of the content of each one of Dietrich's emails. That's easy enough to work around. Unlike Karla, on the other hand, who often forgoes the code or even text and sends her photographs as descriptions, pictures of herself and her fiancé, her colleagues, her flat in Berlin, Mauerpark, Nefertiti's head in a glass case and a line in hieroglyphics explaining her enjoyment of her current area of focus, with a happy face on the end somewhat removing how impressive that was. She is successfully managing to juggle her two fields: some Chemistry, like Mother, along with her practical expertise in Engineering, using the stubbornness most of them inherited from Father. Similar to Bastien – urgh, *Bastien* – who just wilfully ignores any symbols Hermann tries to use or makes up new ones as he goes, and only really talks about his colleagues at the newspaper, the stories he wants to write, probes for details from Hermann that he can use in these, and gossips *endlessly* about things Hermann does not care about - whereas Mother likes to

use alchemical symbols when she writes, a mixture of the periodic table and ancient shapes and runes that are, essentially, dead, but she wants to keep using.

Father always continues in the same code Hermann instigates, never changing it, just plodding on tenaciously with same the cipher, still sending riddles. Still questioning everything Hermann does.

His family are...*exasperating*.

Vanessa is worse.

She emails again.

[*Okay, subtlety abounds, but **I am calling you in 2.5 weeks.** You better have done something!*

Love you]

He already did, not that's telling her, and whilst he doesn't exactly wish that he never had, he chooses instead to just call it an experiment, with what he had suspected proven in turn. It had truly gone so spectacularly over Newton's head that the thought of trying to recapture it is...pathetic. It's off, gone, into the ether. A deep breath, exhaled.

Hermann has a lot of work to do now, and a scant opportunity for the quiet in which to do it now, which he is genuinely excited about.

He *is*.

When Newt gets out of the taxi at his parent's home, he hugs his mom for a good four minutes, without stopping.

"You smell weird," she tells him, swatting him away finally. "Wash!"

He would, but then he's too busy leaping at their dog, Truman, who's finally moved his lazy ass and hobbled in from a deep sleep, flat on his back, on dad's chair. Newt grabs him by the ears and *ruffles*, fuck he has missed that mutt, who it looks like has *really* gotten old whilst Newt's been away, but he still tries to lick Newt's mouth constantly though.

"Ew," he says, laughing, then stops. "...I'm gonna take him in the tub first. He definitely smells worse than me?" He curls his fingers under Truman's collar, glancing back at his mom.

"Oh, great, jute Letze," she says, referencing something he remembers too, rolling her eyes, all hoity-toity and wonderful with her adopted Berliner accent and the cheeky grin he inherited. "Fine. Fine! Go." She shoos him. He nods, nudges his bag closer against the wall with his foot, and scoops up the dog.

He was asked to bathe Truman once when he was a teenager, as one of his chores. Just once, as inevitably he ended up in there as well - how could anyone *not do that*? Drenched through all his clothes, Truman barking, excitedly, and Newt giggling and drumming flat, wet hands on the tiles to add a rhythm and rile him up more, splashing water everywhere. Dad, giving up on practice in the back room in dismay at the noise, had to march in and give a long blast on his trumpet to get their attention. *Classic*. Great memory.

This time he resists climbing in as well. He's an *adult*. But having something to do with his hands

is really, really great. Something to focus on.

He gets soaked to the elbows, slops water all over his thighs, kneeling next to the tub and scrunching shampoo deep into Truman's black/grey fur, making loops and patterns in it, directional variations, curls and lines. Rub it one way, then rub it away. Truman's tongue lolls out of his mouth the whole time, pink and silly, and it strikes Newt, smiling at his dog like his dog is a *person*, that he's never seen any of the kaiju tongues.

It'd be longer than him. What papillae would it have? Would it be gustatory or just perfunctory - five tastes, or less, or more? What kind of surface area? Amphibian, or reptile, *lacerta*? Sensory, testing the air, tasting, or more base, a muscle, digestion and destruction, or to aid in respiration?

His thoughts are interrupted by Truman farting the *second* he's done towelling him off.

Newt gives up.

After he's slept for a hundred years, papa wakes him up by dropping the morning's paper on his forehead, then takes him for currywurst on 1st Avenue. Newt eats too much, telling him a story from a long, boring morning in Tokyo. He'd been nervous about a presentation - nerves do happen to him *sometimes* - so he'd distracted himself by playing keep-ups across the lab with Joe, using balls of wadded plastic gloves and only their elbows. They'd got up to 17, still the record, before Hermann finally snapped, stomped over and hit the ball across the room with his cane. It sailed right across the lab, pretty beautifully - but landed on his own desk, knocking over his cup of pens.

This makes Newt's dad laugh so much that he hiccups fries up into his own mouth.

"That is awesomely gross," Newt chuckles, watching his dad swallow pointedly and then wipe his lips with a napkin. He gets a ketchup sachet thrown in his face for that, but Dad is laughing.

"My son," he announces to the bar, loudly "Making me vomit love!"

Newt laughs, ducking his head, embarrassed, rubbing the back of his neck. Dad claps his own hand there and tugs him in, kisses his forehead. "Missed you, Liebling," he murmurs.

"Aww, man," Newt grumbles, but throws his arms around Dad's smaller shoulders anyway. Breathes in his smell.

The guy behind the bar yells at them to break it up, then laughs at himself, gets them two more *Weihenstephaner hefes* on the house. Turns out Dad's a regular. *No* surprises there.

A few days in Newt stops in the street near their building instead of going in, leans one hip against the cold metal railings, reknits his massive scarf, jams one hand deep in his pockets to keep it warm and uses the other to call up Dean, his first, *bad* teenage crush.

Dean was a friend from high school band class who grew six inches in his final year - well, *Newt's* final year, it was his second - and took up timpani drumming, which gave him *wicked* biceps when Newt went off to MIT, with very little but longing ideas and one aborted kiss that they didn't get to repeat until he was 20.

They've emailed a couple of times in the last few years, kept in touch. He's still in town, and still teaches classes on his weekends. Newt wants to see him, he's a friend, a good guy, yeah. They mess around sometimes, too, so Newt really hopes he gets something out of this because he is wound up like a *spring* here. Nothing is really helping, please see the aforementioned itch and deep *need*, not even dinner (a shared packet of crisps) in his room in Tokyo with one of the medical

trainees that had ended damp and bruised, and with the good burn, but faded away way too fast.

Dean picks him up, swinging his keys around his fingers with a grin, and they go to a game together. They catch up inbetween, share a hotdog - not a euphemism, okay, they really do, but yeah, then they make out in his flat like teenagers afterward. Or, not exactly *teenagers*. Dean kicks the door shut behind him as soon as they get through the door and Newt pushes him back against the kitchen cupboards as soon as he can, drops to his knees so fast the friction of the lino burns where his jeans are already thin, and maybe he sucks Dean's cock a little desperately but it's completely happily, immersively, sloppily, the way he remembers that Dean likes. He snuffs at his balls and opens his throat for the smooth length of him, tongues his slit, the salt, hisses when Dean pulls his hair, and then smiles widely, dazed, later, when he's swallowed like a good, terrible boy and Dean pulls him up, groaning, and strokes a thumb across his lower lip.

"Good to see you, Newt," Dean chuckles, shaking his head.

He grins. "You too."

Next, Dean pushes him back onto his ratty couch and basically sucks his brain out through his dick. Doesn't even let him take his leather jacket off, just spreads his arms and traps him there with hands on the warm leather on the inside of his elbows, and clears Newt's mind to happy static with one long swipe of his tongue and then a talented, open throat.

They lay next to each other for a bit, after, glazed, sated, giddy, their pants open to the air. Dean's had a red flower tattooed on his right hip sometime in the last half decade. Newt spotted it right away, even though he hasn't done anything about it yet, too urgent when they arrived.

So dude," he asks, half turning to tap what he can see under Dean's t-shirt with his fingertips. "A rose?" He slides them across and up the sweep of his dark belly under the fabric, and Dean groans, then laughs.

"I dunno." He rolls toward Newt again. "It was a weird day."

"I can see that."

Laughing, Dean tugs him up onto his feet and starts stripping him, pushing him back towards the bedroom. Newt's kicking off his boots, Dean pulls his shirt further up out of his jeans and starts on his buttons, biting Newt's lower lip, shoving his leather jacket back off his arms and onto the floor; Newt slides his hands right up under Dean's tee, there are fingers shoving his own shirt open, touching his skin, it's so *great*, Dean is kissing him, hitting the lightswitch next to him as they stumble through the doorway, and—

"What the *fuck?*" Dean says, jerking backwards.

Newt freezes, almost skidding, his arms tangled behind him in his shirt. "*What? What?*" He looks around.

"You have— you have kaiju tattoos." Dean's dark eyes are wide, his face gone somewhere angry and astounded. He's frozen, t-shirt rucked up around his pits as far as Newt had gotten it, hands in front of him like he wants to protect himself. "You got fucking *kaiju tattoos?*"

Newt shrugs his shirt carefully back over his shoulders, but leaves it unbuttoned.

"I study them, dude," he reminds Dean. "I have to know a lot about them, and I find them interesting, because I need to understand them." *You know me*, he thinks. Dean's known him since he was 13. *This is how I am, and I'm not changing*. He reaches out a hand to touch Dean's

shoulder, but Dean shrugs it sharply off, stepping away.

“I had family in Sydney,” he snarls, low. His voice is dangerous.

Newt opens his mouth, then closes it.

Okay. Time to go.

He leaves, quickly, boots still unlaced, jacket in one hand, jumping half the steps down the fire exit instead of taking the elevator. He’s angry, yep, and hurt, and a bit embarrassed, and...maybesad. But not exactly surprised. People never *get* it, fuck.

He makes the last subway train at least, so that’s one up on everything else.

Newt sleeps a lot more, he cooks epic and exciting omelettes that his mom side-eyes, he gets black-out drunk at their mini family reunion party when Gunter arrives from Germany, ready for Hanna’s ceremony in a couple of days, and he wakes up on a sun lounger in the backyard, shivering even though he’s got three blankets over him and Truman asleep across his calves.

The winter morning sky is white, any sun behind a layer of cloud, the air crisp and cold. The windows on the buildings either side of theirs reflect pale nothing, or have lights glowing inside, and it reminds him of Berlin as a child so suddenly that he is momentarily thrown. His mom runs her fingertips across his stubbled cheek, frowning at him over her giant shades.

He cracks his dry mouth and his breath comes as steam as he tries to apologise, but she just shushes him, then *boops* him on the nose.

“Breakfast?” she suggests, hands on her hips.

He nods, after a second, confused. “Breakfast?”

“Breakfast!” she repeats, and claps her hands together for the dog, rings clacking, as she goes back inside. “After *which* you can tell me what’s crawled up your ass!” she calls over her shoulder.

He groans, rolls over and pulls the blanket over his face - it exposes his feet to the air but at least he's got socks on, so his feet don't get cold for a while.

He distracts his mom enough with other crap, luckily, that he never has to discuss *why* he is sexually drawn to half-Bavarian, wholly repressed geniuses, nope. He didn't want to have that conversation *in the least*, especially with his mom, so he gives thanks to all plausible deities. Which is basically none of them. Newt’s read every major religious text and nothing’s lit up in his mind yet - alien monsters, also, tend to adjust your perspective on god? Unless you’re a freak like Hermann, apparently, in which case you just become more stubbornly invested in some higher ideal. The guy sees religion in prime numbers. That’s just. *What?*

A couple of days later, Newt goes along with Gunter to pick up Hanna for her graduation. Gunter knocks on her door whilst he hangs back out of view. When she throws it open, she kisses her dad on the cheek, then turns away immediately, shouting about how she just needs five minutes to finish her hair.

Newt sticks his head around the corner and yells: “Wie *schlecht* ist das denn, ich bin nicht den ganzen Weg hierher gekommen, nur um auf dich zu warten!”

Hanna turns so fast she falls over her bed. She’s got *killer* heels on, woah.

It's completely hilarious, once she stops crying hysterically and punching him in the arm, or squeezing his face in her hands, and definitely works as retribution for her teasing. Also, it feels like a weird full-circle retribution for his own awful, but cringingly great memories of someone surprising him at *his* uni. Which was when he came out, which wasn't so much a coming out as a tumbling out; his parents coming to visit him at MIT as a surprise and not even getting to knock on the door before Newt was falling out of it, wrapped up in his guy of 3 gymnastic months at the time, Jimmy, the two of them arguing over whose coat was whose and no, get out of that, okay, let me in *with* you then— and then freezing in the hallway.

Or, Jimmy froze.

Newt leapt four inches upward, span around, and smacked his head against the doorframe.

“...Busted,” Mom had said, like he was 15, not 21.

Dad had turned on his heel and walked off down the corridor, out of view and around the corner, without a word, which had terrified Newt like nothing has ever terrified him before, or since. This part of the memory he's not so keen on, but you have to take the rough with the smooth. He'd looked to his mom for help, mouth open, head throbbing, feeling completely *sick*, but she was looking into the space papa left with a frown – until dad came back, after a few seconds. He'd walked over, took a deep breath in front of Newt, and then put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

“So, na das ist definitiv neu, aber eigentlich sollte uns nichts, was du bist, noch überraschen,” he'd said, smiling, eyes true, then turned to Jimmy with a terrifying expression before Newt could unlock his knees and let himself faint, or burst into wobbly tears, or so much as adjust his glasses and try to remember how his lungs worked, and breathe.

Sometimes pain makes things so much *sweeter*. (Which, might explain his thing for tattoos.)

Dad had forced Jimmy to shake his hand, and come to lunch.

His family are wonderful, and *weird*, and Newt lucked the fuck out being born into it or he knows, he really, really *knows*, he could have ended up a very different person.

Hanna's hysterics are great, but nothing can beat the feeling of watching her graduate. Newt gets a manly tear when she gets her certificate and fists pumps the air in their direction. Gunter cries openly, of course, dribbly, snotty tears all down his white moustache. Newt snorts at his Uncle, slings an arm around his neck and headbutts him affectionately.

“Suck it up, Gunter!”

Gunter shakes his head, unable to. “Mein Schatz,” he whispers, and sobs into his hands. “Mein *wunderhübscher* Schatz!”

Newt's dad pats him on the back, rolling his eyes, shooting Newt a grin. Yeah, papa was familiar enough with Newt graduating from degrees that by the last ceremony, Newt definitely spotted him playing solitaire on his phone. *Asshole*.

“I should really go back to Tokyo,” he suggests, sidestepping away, wiping his eyes under his glasses. His mom elbows him, sharply. She, on the other hand, cried every single time.

It's great. It's a *break*. He feels a million times better after it. He really needed this, yeah. Clarity, and distance.

When he gets back to Tokyo, he feels good. Anya beams when he walks into the lab in the morning and insists he take her turn on the music rota.

“You really don’t have to be so scared of Hermann, you know,” he points out. “You can play whatever you want, when you want.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Seriously? You don’t know what he was *like* while you weren’t here. I can drown him out, sure—” She waves her headphones, here, “—but Harold’s developing a stutter.”

Harold looks up and nods, quickly.

Newt shouldn’t grin.

“Aw, man. Okay. Music therapy!” He whacks on some Chuck Berry, turns it up extremely loud, and forces his staff to work off some steam.

By the time Hermann comes in, he and Agnieszka are Travolta-ing toe-to-toe on top of the main worksurface that runs down the middle of the room whilst Harold grins sheepishly, and Anya films them on her totally oldskool Nokia phone.

“Morning Dr Gottlieb!” he calls, waving.

Hermann gives him a look of death, and strides over to his own corner.

Newt is great. Newt is *great*. Newt makes it through 7 hours of *fantastic* work before, in his peripheral vision, Hermann makes a frustrated sound, running the pads of his long fingers against his mouth in thought whilst he considers an equation that he’s written diagonally across the middle of each of his chalkboards, repeating the same thing – looking for patterns, Newt thinks, by changing the shape, *clever* – with his eyes moving over it fast, slow, lidded, fast again, and then shuts them and tips his head back and takes a breath so annoyed and so large that his shoulders go up and curve, his throat open and pale. His jaw a tactile line.

Newt turns so quickly and stupidly away that he catches his thigh against the corner of his desk *and* stubs his toe.

He hisses, smacking a hand against the surface in anger, then rubs his thigh with the heel of his hand until it stops throbbing.

Fuck.

He needs more time away.

Sitting with his back turned defiantly to the rest of the lab, he sorts through the chaos that’s built up in his official inbox after by his fairly sudden trip to NY. At the bottom, he finds an old email, so old now that it’s a faded red colour. An invitation, which is the kind of thing he and Hermann – he’s recognised the symbol in a glance over Hermann’s shoulder at his inbox - receive fairly frequently. This one’s more of a request, though. A plea. *Begging* him to come to Vladivostok for a 6 month study.

There haven’t been any kaiju attacks for a few months, and they’re suggesting the apparent lull – or what some are even way too optimistically calling the end, which is fucking *stupid* - be used to dig deeper into what they have, to prepare for the future. Samples he’s never seen, new information...

It starts in 2 days.

Newt thinks about it for 3 seconds, and then accepts before he can give himself any reason not to. *Perspective, kid*. A change of scenery. A decent amount of time away from someone who is never, ever going to sleep with him, *and* a tantalising new opportunity. Just what he needs. Because he definitely, definitely still wants Hermann Gottlieb, in some pretty...energetic ways.

Newt tells his team the next day that he's hopping across the Sea of Japan and Peter the Great Gulf. Anya pouts at him, Harold nods, Agnieszka pulls a face.

"*Russia*, Newton? Oh, no *no*," she says, a tiny bit xenophobically there, hey. He just shrugs at her.

"A guy's gotta do what he's gotta do," he reasons. She fights a smile, shaking her head and putting her goggles back on. So Newt spins, then, to face the lab partner he can *feel* staring at him. There he is. Regarding Newt with his mouth all twisted up.

"...Yep?" he prompts.

Hermann raises an eyebrow. "Just considering the sheer unmitigated joy of 6 months without your chaos."

"Atta boy," he says, pointing at Hermann with both index fingers, and not offended at all, any more, really, just amused. "Right on cue with the visceral hatred. I'll miss you too, buddy."

"I live to serve," Hermann drawls, turning away.

Yeah. If something about the words, the accent, the *mouth*, still sends a ridiculous spike of lust right through Newt's gut, he is not telling anyone about it, and he is not going to think about it anymore. He's just. Not. You *can* ignore things until they go away. This totally *works*, he just tried it.

On Monday, the day Newton ought to have been showing his face at some point after his holiday, Hermann had needed to go and schedule his medical evaluation with the team. It had taken long enough – the receptionist was fairly idiotic - that he iwas s 12.4 minutes later than he planned to be, approaching the lab.

As he exited the lift he had already begun to hear music, faintly, from the large white doors at the end of the corridor.

He'd paused, then sagged.

Newton was back.

One door was ajar, and he'd pushed it carefully, expecting the worst, readying himself - but almost nothing *could* have entirely prepared him for the sight of Newton and Agnieszka on a – once clean - worksurface, twisting their hips to an old Rock & Roll song that Hermann absolutely knew the name of but could not recall right then. Newton's knees were bent, his hips twisting, his thighs braced, giggling with Agnieszka as she pointed her toes like a ballet dancer. The lights were bouncing off his glasses, his shoulders rolling, his laugh bright, his thighs flexed and his tight little —

Hermann had turned on his bad leg and done another full lap of the corridors, until he was back to

thinking on the savage truth of how *ridiculous* the whole affair was, how unsanitary, how morose, before heading in.

The next day, though, there'd been an announcement by Newt. Now it is exactly 2.2 weeks since the 20th of January, instead of 2.5, but Hermann fires off an email to Vanessa anyway, in order to head off the inevitable discussion.

[Vanessa,

He will begin a 6 month sabbatical in Russia tomorrow; please picture me weeping for joy at all of the work I will get done. I have also come to a realisation.

I would like to sincerely thank you again for a wonderful Christmas; I was extremely tired before it, moreso than I had realised, and thus the break was much needed. With my thoughts back in order now, however, whilst I am deeply appreciative, I must respectfully disregard your advice given the new, practical evidence on show.

How is work?

- Hermann]

The response comes up on Skype barely a minute later, and she does *not* bother with code. She can also swear on Skype, which is something that he had overlooked. He really must start remembering to log out one of these days. At least he's in his room, not the lab.

Nessa88: *pissing hell Hermann, are you serious?*

HGottlieb: *I appreciate that your family are fairly different to mine, but really, I did have a wonderful time with them. You ought not be so dismissive of your relations.*

Nessa88: *Oh for G*d's sake*

Nessa88: *You know that's not what I mean*

Nessa88: *I hate you*

Nessa88: *I was SO EXCITED about you getting some and telling me details!*

HGottlieb: *You cannot live vicariously through me.*

Nessa88: *No, I got that a long time ago, you and your one date a decade*

HGottlieb: *Charming.*

Nessa88: *I was rooting for you!*

Nessa88: *you can't just change your mind!*

HGottlieb: *My mind was not in the right state to make any such decision.*

HGottlieb: *I am happily re-assured that the correct course of action is to remain colleagues with
no other 'benefits'.*

Nessa88: *so, that means furtive wanking in your room because you're too scared to have a go?*

HGottlieb: ...

HGottlieb: ...

Nessa88: *Ok maybe that was rude*

Nessa88: *but I stand by it*

Nessa88: *:P*

Well, that absolutely does not deem an answer.

Chapter 10

Newt leaves the next day. His team come to wave him off at the helicopter pad, which is adorable. Well, most of them, Hermann just scowls and pulls the high collar of the back of his coat up around his ears, but he half-lifts a hand when they take off, and stays after the rest tramp back inside - a tiny, irritated black dot adding some punctuation to the H as Newt flies off to bigger, better and colder things. Like an umlaut. Well, half an umlaut. Or a very *specific* stress.

It's kind of nice of him to stay and make sure the helicopter doesn't explode - unless he's rigged it to - but pretty confusing to Newt who feels very, at that moment, very *strange*, like his heart is beating way too loud in his chest, the back of his neck hot like when he's got a presentation to do without actually being able to prepare for it, whilst Hermann appears to have gone rigid with pure bliss at the thought of all that time to work uninterrupted, now.

Newt props his elbow on the doorframe, his chin on his hand, and looks away toward the pilot. The pilot is *hot*, and awesome, but unfortunately she ignores him all the way to the airport.

After so long in Tokyo, Vladivostok feels kind of flat, but Newt likes it right away. The snow and the temperature change is crazy. He feels the cold in his *bones*. The colours are darker, calmer. The Russky bridge is still being repaired from kaiju damage but is so incredible as the helicopter swoops in - Newt wiggles across on the benchseat in order to be able to see it better as they come around. *So* cool, the cable stays, the pylons *alone* - an engineering feat he can completely appreciate even if it isn't his specialty area.

He can also, in a separate part of his brain, appreciate the way giant claws and body mass sliced through the work and mashed it up, and he decides to instigate a field trip to study the surface area of damage, map out size, pressure, weight, feet.

The snow is up past his knees when they land and he hops out onto the brushed clean heli pad. He pauses at the edge, considering it in some dismay, then decides to balance his bag half on his shoulders and half up on his head before stepping into the heaped bank of white. He shoves his way through to the door and tries not to feel too short on the way.

Waiting for him is his new Marshall, Delov. Delov is totally bald, tall, and beaming, and shakes Newt's hand firmly, once. Then he gives Newt a full tour of the Shatterdome, wherein he meets his temporary colleagues, sees the new lab which is almost entirely his, and presses his nose and hands to a tank that has an almost whole, almost intact *lung* in it holy shit, potentially freaking everyone out with his enthusiasm but hey, this is what they pay him for, so. Get over it.

He gets introduced to the Kaidanovskys, a newly married couple finishing up their training as a Jaeger team who are both really, scarily, *excitingly* attractive, is forced to drink hot borscht in celebration of his arrival, and then is finally allowed to stumble into his new quarters in shocked joy about 6 hours later.

Awesome.

Hermann emails him after 3 days. The message pings up as he's at his new desk, unpacking a couple of things, swaying along to *The New World Symphony* which he has been listening to a lot since he arrived. It just seemed so fitting and he couldn't resist; there is a time for delicacy and there is a time for Dvořák, and that is now.

Newt stares at the notification for a minute. Hermann contacted him first. Ha *ha*, the rush of

smugness is good, along with the excitement, dread, and consternation over what it could say. Either way, though, smugness. The *smugness*.

He *knew* Hermann would be lost without him.

HGottlieb : Did you take my Euler biography with you?

Uh, Newt thinks, first, *Nope - I took the Friedrich Gauss tome instead*. He then experiences concurrent streams of thought, in that moment, which also include *Nice, I move countries and that's what he asks me*, and *I do not miss you, you fucker, I really do not miss you at all* and *I wonder what you're wearing today*, but he leans down to leaf through the box of books by his foot for appearances anyway.

Geisssszler : no

Hermann replies immediately.

HGottlieb : Are you, in fact, lying?

Geisssszler : no I a, *in fact*, being totally h9onest. if it' gone, you lost it urself dude

HGottlieb : Statistically improbable.

HGottlieb: Additionally, I accurately predicted with Dr Khan that you would already have edited your username to something crass. You owe me 10,000 yen.

Newt chuckles, and then screams, out loud, his head tipped back and his hands in fists, joyous and aggravated beyond belief. This startles his new assistant Polina so badly that she drops a beaker. He *loves* this, but he *hates* this. He'd forgotten what a dick Hermann is when you're not looking at his face. Or, especially when you look at his face. His stupid, gorgeous face.

Geisssszler: wunderbah

Geisssszler: how bout

Geisssszler : FUCK

Geisssszler: OFF

Geisssszler: HERMS

Hermann doesn't reply, and then Newt's account gets blocked for a couple of days after that, anyway. He could chose to hack in and undo that, but doesn't.

Deep breath in. Deep breath out. He's going to find his inner zen - or an approximation of this theory that he can support and not just see holes in - in Vladivostok if it *kills* him.

It only takes a few days before Hermann, stubbornly enjoying the ever so slightly shocked quiet in the lab and the new space to work in, being able to enjoy his own thoughts, the gentle scribbling of Anya's defiant need to work with pen and paper instead of computer, the background white noise of Khan and Agnieszka conversing, has this clarity shattered by the lingering effects of one Dr Geiszler.

Inevitable, he supposes, but still incredible that one person can make him boil over in rage when not even in the same country. Unable to find one of his favourite biographies, he both forgoes and abuses his security clearance to locate Newton's new personal address in the Vladivostok system in less than 2.026 minutes and sends him a message, even though he'd promised himself not to do so. The man is vile, awful, how *dare* he take Hermann's things?

It goes as well as anyone might have expected.

Hermann refuses to answer that kind of response from anyone, be it Vanessa, his family, or his erstwhile colleague, but thankfully he hears nothing more for a few days. In the meantime, Vanessa has sent him the same line of apology on skype, every day since they last spoke.

He responds, finally, on a Wednesday.

HGottlieb: *A 6 month break out of nowhere is a fairly obvious piece of data for the simplest mind.*

Nessa88: *hey!!*

Nessa88: *I love you and I'm sorry*

Nessa88: *...Wait, are you telling me you think Jesus sent him to Russia?*

Nessa88: *because I'm pretty sure our Saviour has better things to do*

HGottlieb: *Don't be inane. Dr Geiszler does whatever he wishes. I have in a sense been gently rebuffed, and I see a design in this, in the shape of it, which I am fairly sure is for me.*

Nessa88: *Hermann*

HGottlieb: *And this is my decision.*

Nessa88: *Hermann*

HGottlieb: *I may have fully prepared myself to...attempt something, but I now thank my lucky stars, in a sense, that I never needed to. It was wholly unwise.*

Nessa88: *URGH*

Nessa88: *You men are so changeable*

HGottlieb: *The opportunity presented by this distance has made this clear to me.*

Nessa88: *You are all*

Nessa88: *AWFUL CREATURES*

HGottlieb: *I will, unfortunately, have to defect from my gender and gender preference and agree with you.*

Nessa88: *I am really unimpressed*

Nessa88: *...Hmn*

Nessa88: *Are you sure?*

HGottlieb: *Completely.*

Nessa88: *but. You said he had green eyes. It took you 2 years to look up from study long enough to notice mine, and they're most of the reason I'm a model*

HGottlieb: *What are eyes to inanity and rage induced aneurisms?*

HGottlieb: *You are a model because of your number of wonderful attributes, also, do not reduce yourself so.*

Nessa88: *Well*

Nessa88: *fuck*

Nessa88: *now I KNOW you needed a break, if you're referencing P&P, and sounding weirdly like*

Dietrich at the end there

HGottlieb: *Please do not remind me that you frequently communicate with him.*

Nessa88: *Stop changing the subject*

HGottlieb: *You brought it up.*

Nessa88: *Fine. FINE*

Nessa88: *As always, I suppose you must know your own mind well enough*

Nessa88: *everyonewho has ever met you knows I won't be able to dissuade you either way*

HGottlieb: *Thank you.*

HGottlieb: *I think.*

Nessa88: *You're welcome*

Nessa88: *and, shit*

Nessa88: *I feel depressed now. I might have to give up and let Dietrich fly over and take me for that dinner he's been suggesting for a couple of years*

HGottlieb: *That is NOT fUnny and never will be, VANESSA.*

Nessa88: *Typo, Hermann*

Nessa88: *:D :D*

HGottlieb: *Friendship with you will be the inevitable cause of my stress-induced coma, I am convinced.*

Nessa88: *Don't worry, things will never be that bad*

Nessa88: *but I am going need SOMEONE to get some action*

Nessa88: *no-one's asked me out since September.*

Nessa88: *except your big brother, of course*

HGottlieb: *I could quit, you know. Give up.*

HGottlieb: *Let the kaiju rampage their way as far as the British Isles...*

Nessa88: *haha*

Nessa88: *Don't worry darling*

Nessa88: *This is why I own 3 vibrators*

Hermann chokes on his water and sprays his keyboard, and thus has to spend the time carefully cleaning, drying and re-sanitising it.

A few days later, a message comes through at what is an appallingly early morning for him, though he is already working, but a comfortable one in Vladivostok. The notification noise makes him jump, glasses dropping right off his nose and bumping his chest, caught by the strings around his neck.

He peers at the screen to his left.

Geisssszler: *found yr book up yr a\$\$ yet/?*

HGottlieb: *You know very well that I have not.*

HGottlieb: *Found an actual, useful DNA sequence or just a handful of random bits and pieces, yet?*

And so, it begins.

In fact, they message fairly constantly, over the 6 months. He never finds his book, for one, which is a constant source of seething vitriol, but there are also new projects, ideas. Questions. It reminds Hermann of their first contact, and the distance is...helpful.

Newton is so irritatingly *moronic* in the conversational form, when he doesn't bother - or perhaps doesn't have enough *shame* - to correct his typos or mistakes that he would in a publication, that it reminds Hermann of one of things he finds very unattractive about him. There is no strive for perfection, no *care*, at times. He barrels through life as so wilfully *himself* – and it's too much. It makes Hermann nervous, uncomfortable. It's distasteful. He needs to *remember* this.

The visceral, expletive-ridden communiques are useful. Hermann doesn't find it appealing - perhaps he finds it abstractly brave, as with a number of things that Newton is, but he's covered

this ground, he's known that for a long while. What it most definitely is not is *sexy*. Therefore: Hermann wrinkles his lip at the scattered mistakes over communication, hunches his shoulders, and sets to work picking his way through them to find the ideas and logic hidden inside. There, as usual, reading between the lines, the emoticons, the *tangents*, he can follow the bright thread of Newton's thoughts and find the perspective, the blunt analysis, the complicated suggestions. There, his annoyingly unique view.

He's not blind, even if he has had to buy reading glasses. He can see that he needs it. It's useful.

So no, he doesn't miss Newton's physical presence – the break from his...distracting form, is exactly what was required. It's *blissful*. It gives Hermann the opportunity to get himself under control again. Prolonged exposure had weakened him. Like aversion therapy. Eyes and smile and thighs, battering his defences. Hermann mentally and gratefully takes the opportunity to *slap himself about the face*. What on earth was he thinking? The holiday was a disaster. Vanessa's advice is *always* a disaster.

Here is the opportunity to master his baser instincts, and regain perspective.

He takes it, gratefully.

The team he's working with in Vladivostok is tiny. There's him, and then there's Polina, who seems terrifyingly young to Newt even if she is the intelligent black haired ice-queen of anyone's stereotypical Russian dreams, *loves* his tattoos, but is shocked and baffled by his fluid sexuality. Surely this makes no sense? Newt feels like this makes no sense.

She observes him with judgement for his first three days, before bluntly asking him:

“You also lay with *men*, yes?”

Newt is only too happy to clarify, to extend any world view. “As often as I can, and with acrobatic prowess.”

Polina twists her lip and turns away, but does seem to consider his answer, later, eyes flicking across to him frequently. She digs further two days afterward, bringing over a test result to him with a blunt and anatomical query that makes him choke, then laugh.

“Could you maybe confirm the age of consent here again? Just, uh, before I give too much detail and get kicked out.”

She rolls her eyes. “I am married, nothing is surprising,” she says, dour.

“...Huh.” Newt thought she was still a wunderkind, like he was, but turns out she's 22, has been working at the base since she was 19, and is married to the head Programmer. She has beautiful babyface worse than *him*, and she slowly comes around to him, over time. Slowly, slowly.

The third part of their beautiful love triangle is Khamisi. An improbable and fantastic mix of Russian and Kenyan, Newt essentially stares at him for 6 months because it is impossible not to, okay. He is tall, lean, has a reverberatingly low voice, a cheeky-fucker grin with a chipped canine tooth, and huge black eyes. And he sings under his breath, as he works. He brings in *cakes*. He's like a walking dream. He shouldn't exist. Another singularity.

“How are you *real*?” Newt says, again, three months in, kicking his heels back against a desk as

they wait for an experiment to heat. Khamisi stands next to him with his enormous arms crossed and bright blue gloves on, and chuckles, good-naturedly.

“I have told you this many times, Dr. Newton,” he says. “My Mother and my Father were very in love, and so they folded their fingers and they wished—”

“Stop talking.” He laughs. “You’re a product of my fevered imagination and I love you.”

Polina makes a snorting noise across the lab. Newt flicks her a look, she shrugs at him, he shrugs, raises his eyebrows, she tilts her head and sighs, *okay*, and then shrugs again, *da, okay*, and Newt clamps down his smile and turns back to Khamisi.

“My wife will be very happy to hear this, again,” Khamisi intones, when he has Newt’s attention back.

“I might love her too. Now! Tell me more about Mombasa so I can plan.” He’s taking every opportunity to learn, a lot. “I’ll go when we all save the world. What’s the shark attack ratio, currently? Describe the socio-political climate, the geography, and the best bars, in ascending order. I’m happy to start at the bottom.”

The fact is, though, as both of his colleagues are married off-base, Newt spends a lot of time in the main dome, instead, watching the pilots and getting to know the other departments.

Here the trainee pilots seem to be everywhere, and they tend to be fit and kind of...lungey, in the corridors – there is an absolute focus on the physical training, the mental and body strength, in this base. He gets it. They are fierce, staunch about defence, want to truly hold their own part of this partnership they’ve got going with Tokyo’s strike group. And there are definitely not this many pilots wandering around in Tokyo, always with that invisible string between them that Newt always feels he must be passing through, any time he walks down a corridor and two pilots part to let him down the middle – he knows he’s imagining it but he still *feels* a sensation, sometimes, like a shiver right in the base of his spine, or putting your hand on piano strings when you hit a chord.

Or maybe like he’s a kaiju bearing down through them and snapping it, rawr.

Wrestling is the drift compatibility test here. Newt has a healthy dose of scepticism about all of the tests he’s heard or read about, not least this one. The head brass make pilots play at riddles, or word association, or shut their eyes and sketch, whilst others make them fight with fists, swords, sticks. Newt can’t help but think that if you have to *test* it all the time, well, *methinks the lady doth protest too much*, you know? But he can appreciate the view here. Yep. Oh *yep*.

Particularly the Kaidanovskys, but he strongly suspects they do it as foreplay, or just for fun, rather than to improve their bond or help others train. Newt is helpless in the face of this, either way, and forgets which of them is which every single time he talks to them. Or, not really *forgets*, exactly, he just can’t pin the information down because they *mess with their names*. The first time he gets them wrong (possibly) the lady, Sasha? laughs throatily at him and Aleksis raises one dark eyebrow.

He is so, so huge, but Newt knows someone who is totally pussy-whipped, okay, all evidence makes this clear and Newt completely *respects* that. He’s there. He’s not scared of him at all. Mostly. Mostly he is just turned *on*, all the time, but the 1 very quiet rumour he ever hears says that they only once took a woman into their bed, which is just the world being completely un-fucking-fair.

He *loves* this place, though. He doesn’t get out of the base much but the winter temperatures

permeate even inside, and he's never been this cold, which is exciting; he sleeps in as many layers as Hermann wears on a summer day and stares down at his toes and thighs in the communal showers as they blush from white back to pink under the hot water. He learns how to work 2 scarves at once when going out for food, until April, when things start to melt, and a riot of colourful green starts to bloom outside.

Cyrillic is brilliantly insane and Newt wants to do a full, geeky comparison to kanji but he doesn't exactly have time, only the drive to take pictures of the best phrases on his phone and try to get post-its with weird messages in it onto Khamisi's back, without him noticing. He makes a query out loud over dinner and then gets corned in a corridor the next day - literally, backed up into the wall - by Aleksis, who shoves books of Russian poetry - Pasternak, Nabokov, Vysotsky, Antokolsky - into his hands, and then lingers, his big hands open over the hard covers.

"You bend spines, I bend yours," he intones, staring down at him.

Newt nods quickly. "Got it!" He grins when Aleksis pauses, as if unwilling to really part with the books, before striding away.

He misses Tokyo, of course. He even misses Hermann, a weird mix of his vitriol and his intellect and his presence, and after the initial red mist passes they can and do communicate pretty frequently, which helps him with his work. *Of course* it does. Having him not be there is key. No slim limbs and expressive mouth in Newt's peripheral vision, and he's getting used to it. He misses Hermann in a new and different way. Yeah, apparently he's always going to have some bias towards him, but he does seriously think in Vladivostok he might be part of the most attractive amalgamation of minds that the world has ever seen, and that is a neat turn of events. They are unquestionably the rock-stars of K-Science in this hemisphere. Unfortunately, they're tucked away in a base in Russia under a fair amount of snow, so no-one actually knows. He's been tempted to videocall Tokyo just to push his assistants onto the screen and point at them, for about 5 months. *Look, Hermann!*

But, that would be inappropriate.

He does spend a fair amount of time considering what their band name should be, though. Khamisi suggests names constantly, terrible, terrible names, whilst Polina utterly refuses to indulge either of them, and Newt finds a way to work with his Vladivostok team *and* his - fuck, the universe help him but his *favourite* Toyko colleague - simultaneously. Because he needs Hermann, prodding, probing, making him justify himself, making him explain, pointing out something Newt had skimmed over. He'd known this, but distance helps to clarify, to make it clearer. A big, cosmically lit sign. Absence makes the mind grow fonder.

Hermann is the lab partner he never wanted, but apparently always needed.

This is depressing, but brilliant. The rough with the smooth; no pain, no gain, etc, etc. Gunter's big on these platitudes. Turns out that might be a family trait.

Newton calls for the first time after 48 (working and weekend) days. Agnieszka answers the phone, because Hermann has his hands full of end of month reports and the clarification of the date of his medical evaluation for the next month, which he is pulling a face at.

Karla's wedding is at the end of the summer, and though Hermann's been doing his physio, rote - well, once a week, usually - in his room, he wants to be able to not use his cane for entirety of the

day and to dance with her, at least once. He may have to discuss this with the physician, and take some advice, which is an uncomfortably public prospect. He dislikes discussing his injury at the best of times, even with medical professionals. There will be...prodding, both physical and verbal. He supposes that he ought to steel himself.

Agnieszka jerks the phone away from her ear immediately upon answering it, sighs, and then hands it to Hermann without a word, wiggling it when he just *looks* at her over the top of his glasses. He swaps items with her, and she absolutely *yanks* the papers out of his hands so that he can take it.

“Yes?” he asks, distracted, glaring at her, but his attention sharpens when he hears the words.

“Okay I have literally *one minute* so I need you to avoid niceties and— wait. What am I saying.” Newton laughs at himself down the phone before Hermann can even open his mouth, or digest the swoop in his stomach at that most specific cadence, and barrels right on. “I need to know the projected apex of your breach currently, but I need you to give it to me in integers only, no polynomials.”

“It is not *my* breach, you idiot.” He turns toward his desk. “Why on earth do you want base integers?”

“*One minute*, Hermann. Seriously.”

“Oh, fine.” He does as he’s rudely ordered, listens to Newton repeat the numbers once to himself, knows that this means he will have it, won’t need to have written it down, and then eavesdrops on him relaying them over his shoulder to what Hermann assumes is one of his two new and apparently beautiful assistants, that he has mentioned once or twice in messages. That, or he is talking to himself, again, which Hermann has caught Dr Geiszler doing more than once.

“Okay.” Rustling and then clearing of a throat. “Great, done. So...thanks.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Newton chuffs a laugh. “I won’t.”

“When *do* you?”

“Okay, have you not had any caffeine today? You seem especially snippy.”

“The simplicity with which you view life is staggering.”

“That’s a no, then.”

“You are an idiot, and, mind your own business. Did you get my notes?”

“Yes. It was...useful. I mean, you’re completely wrong and apparently *damaged*, but I’ll send my thoughts on that later.”

“By 1pm, if you can actually manage to focus long enough on one task.”

And so on.

Most of their phonecalls follow this pattern, as well, but that’s fine. It is a little quiet in the lab, perhaps, but so much of Newton comes across in emails or through a few words that Hermann can almost feel him, poking him right in the ribs to get his attention, every time the notification buzzes

at him, or when the phone rings and he glances up. It drives him to distraction, but has led him to knowledge; that he looks forward to Newton returning because he truly does miss *him*.

At last.

At Hermann's medical appointment, the physician - thankfully *not* the one he's previously observed partially dressed in a corridor at 4am - listens to his blunt descriptions, examines his x-rays and then the intermittently dulled and tingling nerves of the still pinkish surgery scars, the straight slice down his right thigh and the dots around his knee, whilst Hermann sits in his blue boxers and stares up at the ceiling, or the top of the doctor's inky black hair. Doctor Itami runs the pad of his thumb hard down the centre of Hermann's thigh, makes him flex it, makes him do it again with a hand spread open over his kneecap and Hermann's back as straight and tight as his throat, then gives him privacy to get re-dressed.

His main instructions are to attend the gym in the base.

"Standing so much is exercise in itself but you need to be working the gastrocnemius and hamstring. Go on a bike once a week. Nothing fast, just steady."

"I was...not aware that there was such a place here," Hermann says. "Are you sure? I can't imagine the money was spared on gathering exercise equipment for anyone other than the pilots."

Doctor Itami snorts, glancing down at his notes. Hermann is sure that he is younger than him. Hermann will soon be but a year from thirty, and he already feels older. The doctor is boyish and broad at the same time, so it's difficult to tell, but Hermann revises his estimation to 25.7 years. "I *refer* to the pilot's gym."

"Oh, no. I refuse to enter that with them." The hideous embarrassment, the noise, the *smell*, and the polarity of his physique in comparison to theirs - it doesn't bear any consideration. *No*.

"There *are* times when it's empty." Doctor Itami watches him, annoyingly amused, his lips quirked. "People tell me that the K-Science team works odd hours..."

"Hmn." Hermann looks away toward the hideous green curtain next to him, tapping his fingers on his bad knee, on top of his crossed legs. Sitting like this may not help with the ache, but he is not sharing that. "Is it regularly cleaned?" he asks, looking back. "By which I mean *more* than a cursory once a day."

"I-" Doctor Itami frowns. "I'm sure it is."

"I wouldn't be."

"You know that pessimism is not good for the health, Doctor Gottlieb?"

Hermann stares. "...Did you just *lie* to me?"

The doctor laughs, shaking his head. "Nevermind." He stands up quickly, handing Hermann the pass card for the gym. Hermann does the same, ignoring the loud click in his knee, and tucking the pass into the breast pocket of his jacket, noticing where it is warm to the touch with some distaste.

"Well." He looks at the doctor. "Thank you."

"Of course." Doctor Itami reaches out to shake his hand; Hermann realises that he has to take it *again*, even though they already did this when he first walked in. He does, briefly, then leaves as quickly as possible.

Dietrich emails him that night to probe him about the appointment. There are days when he is thankful for his eldest brother's memory for dates, and others when he curses it. He ignores the email all week, but he does pop his head around the door of the gym on his way back to his quarters on Thursday night and finds it passably empty, clean, and warm. The bike is in the corner, and the control pad is big enough to rest a book or a tablet on.

He nods to himself. Optimistic, indeed.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Now with added artwork by Sannam - click the link to see. THANK YOU! <333

So it's been a fairly long time without any kaiju, now, and though no-one will actually say it out loud, people are getting restless. Newt is getting the *vibe*.

The Kaidanovskys have taken to loitering around their Jaeger, Chernob Alpha, which has an awesome sort of Soviet-steampunk thing going on that Newt is absolutely not going to talk about out loud because he will get slapped upside the head by someone, but appreciates.

"Guys..." he suggests, the third time he bumps into them in the hallway near his room – he's on the same floor as the main doors outside, toward the coastline and the Okhotsk Sea, and the two of them are either coming in from pacing, or going out to stare intently at the waves. "Maybe...get a hobby?"

The matching glare sends him scuttling away, but he gets it. They're sort of looking forward to it, just like he's sort of looking forward to it, and they all might feel weird about that, unable to sleep. Wired, ready. A fist in the pit of their stomachs.

It's not that they want to see kaiju, though, it's that they all want to *stop* kaiju. Maybe his way is slightly less splatter-all-over-the-coastline-violent, and more stop, incapacitate and maybe-find-a-way-to-keep-and-study, but it's similar enough that when he sees them still pacing the main dome floor, when he's up at 5.30am to find coffee and get into the lab before his beautiful assistants come in, that when he nods at them, they nod back in quiet affinity with him. They also nod in perfect unison with each other. Fuck, they are *awesome*.

Tuesday night, after Pol and Khamisi have gone home, he meanders toward the Shatterdome to see what's going down and finds them again, this time getting in the way of the techs during the scheduled maintenance check of Chernob Alpha. As he watches, Sasha sighs, then jumps and climbs up it bodily to inspect the munitions, closely. The techs don't seem to even notice.

It's possible she does this a lot.

Aleksis leans in the shadows below with his arms folded, half in his suit and half not. He nods at Newt when he spots him, and Newt just grins and mimes reading a book, making Aleksis flick one big hand, his rings flashing in the dark, as if to make Newt go *away*. Alas, dude, Newt has got the upperhand here, Aleksis has given his weakness away, which was really stupid, because he keeps his reading habits quiet whereas Newt does *not*. And doing that is *also* stupid - if everyone else other than Newt found out he was a hopeless 19th century poetry geek, well, they'd just like him *more*, right? Newt does.

Sasha certainly looked pleased enough about it, too.

Very early April, one of the slightly less freezing nights than previously, Newt wanders up to the roof in his hastily purchased pea coat and boots with long pyjama pants and a sweater underneath, to check out the freaking *incredible* stars. He bypasses all the doors he's not supposed to be able to

get through, easily; a few wiggles of his talented fingers and he is shoving the final door hard with his shoulders and hip, to get it to open against the snow.

“*You* wander like lost child,” someone says as he comes out onto the roof and he jerks, surprised, spinning to see Sasha smoking out there, blowing curls of white into the darkness above her. Newt loses hold of the heavy door in his surprise, and it slams behind him.

“Uh, woops—” He wishes immediately that he’d brought gloves. He rubs his hands together, jams them deep into his pockets, and shrugs at her. “Yep.”

She nods, so he walks toward the red flare at the tip of her cigarette, the underlit curl of her blonde hair, the crisp sparkle of stars overhead. The night sky in Vladivostok just makes you *gasp*, fuck - he stops next to her and stares up at it, shoulders lifting to his ears against the cold, the weird pitch blackness with the floodlights below and refraction all around from what there is bouncing off his glasses, reflecting things back into the bottom curve of the panes.

“I don’t sleep much,” he adds.

She nods, next to him, taking another drag, and this is the nod of someone similarly afflicted with insomnia. Silence, then, which Newt’s always okay with, which surprises people, but in that moment he does start kicking a foot against the tiny icicles hanging off the bottom of the railing, because they crunch nicely.

“You are *long*?” Sasha asks, after a moment.

What is— He gapes at her, with a little bit of horror, there. “Huh?”

“You are long, you...” She moves her cigarette in a circle. “There is someone you miss?”

“Oh!” He shakes his head, turning, folding his arms and leaning back against the cold metal of the railing. ‘*Schmachten*’, his German brain provides, in a voice mostly like his dad’s but also a little, terrifyingly, like Hermann’s Bavarian ridiculousness, ‘*Verb: To yearn*’. “No, no. I mean, yeah, of course, but not like *pining*.”

She raises an eyebrow. He stares. She stares. The world rotates a little, infinitesimally.

“...Maybe.”

“Ahh.” She makes a perfect *o* with her mouth, inhaling her smoke, and breathes it out across the view of the heli pad and the engineering quarter below, her elbow on the railing, the smell of the sea coming from far away. When she glances at him, suddenly, he almost twitches. “...*Da*?” she prompts.

“Oh!” He looks back at her, trying to get a feeling for this, and trying not to fidget - he doesn’t know her at all, really, they haven’t *bonded* yet, you know. “It’s, uh. It’s no big.”

“It is not problem for me to listen to you.” She turns around, too, but hops up and sits on the railing in a way that sort of makes Newt’s stomach leap sickly into his chest because she could fall backward and disappear into the snow and then they’d be down a badass pilot, and it’s not like he could help - or maybe she could get her ass stuck to it through her pants? He knows, obviously, *scientifically*, no, she cannot, but she does appear to be warm enough that she’s happy only in a jacket and Newt has gooseflesh through his thick *coat*, and apparently it’s spring soon, so he might need to toughen up a bit, here, is the point. She also looks effortlessly cool.

“I cannot sleep, too,” she continues, easily, ignoring his inner panic and envy. “It will be

entertainment for me.”

Honesty appears to be the best policy, with her. Newt shakes his head, amused. “*Nah*, really, no worries. I work with them, so I probably shouldn’t tell you.” And oh *fuck*. He always runs his mouth off when he’s excited, like his brain can’t keep up with it, which isn’t exactly how these things are supposed to work, his mind is supposed to be the one in charge but occasionally it’s like his body just organises a coup. *We’re getting involved now!!!*, things shout at him; pheromones, instinct, adrenaline, chemicals all lining up to surge forward. Sasha immediately looks *very* interested and Newt slaps himself on the forehead.

“*Oh*.”

When he looks up again she has her blue gaze on him, curious, piercing. He thinks about it. Then doesn’t think. “I *might* tell you.”

“It is me?” she suggests. “Or my Aleksis?”

Newt laughs, a little hysterically. “Haha! No, no. Well, *yeah*, of course, have you guys seen yourselves, but no.”

“In my opinion, I like your Polina. Pretty Russian girl...” Sasha grins, briefly, wickedly, all white teeth and lipstick, and takes another drag of smoke.

Newt blinks, and then shivers from his head, all the way down his spine, to his cold *toes*. What an image. What a beautiful, scary thought. “*Awesome*.”

She laughs, then, the sound bouncing off across the roof, and elbows him so hard he stumbles. “Speak.”

He sighs, folding his arms to keep himself warm. *No*, he wants to say, I have not even spoken to my cousin or my friends or my sexy, sexy lab assistants about this one, because I am past it, I have made adult life decisions, I am *gone* to a better place. But then he also, what— *grabs the bull by the horns, takes lemons and makes lemonade*, looks at the constellations overhead, at Sasha’s flat expression, at the fact he’s only there temporarily, and the fact that what’s the big fucking deal, no-one would even hear him *scream* up here if he did, for example if she decided to grab him by the throat and squeeze, which she definitely could. And that is definitely sexy.

Opportunity knocks but once, and all that. Or, potentially elbows him off a roof if he doesn’t talk.

“Okay, I will,” he says, in a hurry.

She nods, to make him continue. But. How to *put* this.

["He's a...crazy person. Awful."](#) Terribly and horribly sexy, in ways that speak to all the kinks I've always had, but also some fun new ones I apparently didn't even know I did? I hate him, but I need him, and I might even have come to *like* him, and I definitely work better with him than anyone, ever, so I can't have sex with him.” He untucks his hands from where they're warming in his armpits to wave them around. “It's this whole Thing. But I've worked it out.”

“You. ...Are very interesting.” Sasha seems fascinated by him. He's *so* happy to have made her night more exciting. He glares at her briefly.

“*No*, I am master of my own desires, is what I am.” He rubs his nose with his palm, suddenly; it's gotten super cold and it always fucking goes *pink* when it is. His schoolfriends used to point that one out pretty often. He doesn't want to look stupid as he's saying this stuff out loud. “I only want

his brain now, not his body.”

“Da.”

“...Do you have any idea what I mean?”

Sasha shakes her head, solemnly, then laughs again, stubbing out her cigarette in the snow. “When I want something, then I *have* something.”

“Of course.” Newt musters more courage and tips himself backward over the barrier, to stare up at the stars again upside down, and sighs long and impressively, watching the vapour disappear above his face.

“You are the same as this, though, I think?” she continues, and he turns his chin to look at her in confusion. She’s reached out, got a hand hovering over his arm. “*Tattoos.*”

That’s one way to put it. Huh. True; he doesn't really give a fuck, what anyone *else* wants him to do, or not do. “...Yeah, I guess.”

“So. ...You think not to do something?”

“Yep. Big no.”

“Hnn.” Sasha grunts in response, thoughtfully, then jumps down from the railing without warning, starting to stamp her feet when she lands to shed the ice.

“...Is this your entire comment?” He’s a little lost, and possibly annoyed. “I don’t see how grunting is a full and varied judgement on this.”

She glares at him, shocked by his nerve. “Hush, *child*,” she rumbles, and *woah* there, no, she is definitely *not* older than him – Newt hacked the system to check all of the pilots’ ages on a whim one bored evening and she is over a year younger than him, if he remembers right, which he 100% does because he has that handy killer memory—

He straightens up. “Now, hey—”

“*Newton.*” She interrupts him purely using the force of her voice, which would be more impressive if he hadn’t long ago realised that gorgeous people shouting has always worked pretty effectively on him. To shut him up, or drive him on. Hermann shouting, for example? Like a red flag, *on fire*. “I am told you have large and important brain. Why do you not trust yourself?”

“Ahh, that old adage. I thought it was the heart you listened to? Or. The gut?” He is getting these platitudes *confused*. How does Gunter keep up with this stuff so well?

Sasha blows out air, frustrated, her hands on her hips, and Newt feels that feel, bro, and then he has to snort at the entire conversation, the entire state of affairs, and also that her nose is pink as well.

“You should know,” he points out, “that flattery will not make me forget that you just dissed me. *Kid.*”

She mutters something he does not know, and turns to head for the door.

“How did you know to be with Aleksis?” he calls after her, surprising them both. Yep. Okay, his just mouth is going for it, it is just kicking *ass* today – sure *curiosity killed the cat*, being nosey is a fault, whatever. Newt’s apparently taking his chances, here.

Sasha pauses for a second, turning back to him with her eyebrows raised at his sheer audacity, maybe. Then she tilts her head. “The first day I met my Aleksis, he write me poem. Haiku. Japanese thing - you were in Tokyo, you know this?” She waits for him to confirm, and when he does, carefully, continues. “He came into female changing room, at night, which was a great risk. Push it through holes in front of my locker. They were too small, so he used his fist – there was a great dent when I returned the next day.” Her smile at this is quick and lovely and intimate, her chuckle low.

He processes. “A haiku. In *Cyrillic*?”

She shrugs again.

Newt stares. That’s a crazy mixture of things that he needs to see *right now*. He’s fairly jealous. “...Cool.” He fidgets, then, against where the metal is digging into his back, taking all that in. Sasha watches him, then nods and turns away again. Newt isn’t going to, but then he—

“Wait!” he calls after her again, and she turns, this time with her face drawn into a scowl, halfway through the door now. *Yeah* this is why Newt frustrates people, but he keeps going.

“So what if you couldn’t— like, what if you couldn’t Pilot if you were *together*? If you couldn’t be married, ‘cause it would just mess it all up and he’d be freaked out by your sexual prowess or whatever, or maybe you come on to him but he is just so, so not interested and never speaks to you again, or maybe you turn out to be completely incompatible once you fuck and you can never quite work so well again—” Newt’s all over the place on the details here, he can’t exactly be specific when the possibilities for failure are pretty much endless, but he *thinks* she’s getting it. “...Would you still. Would you still Pilot with him?”

“Da.” Sasha doesn’t even pause.

Newt blinks. Uh, this is fairly fucking momentous, surely it needs a bit more thought than that. He unfolds his arms to make this point, stepping forward. “No but I mean, you need to really consider this—”

“*Da*,” she repeats, stopping him. “It is not question. To be with Aleksis? Any way. Da.”

Oh.

He feels like— he feels something deep, deep down, simultaneously unknot, and re-tighten. He nods, a lot. Relief is like a heady rush of *air*, after holding your breath. “Okay.” He adjusts how his standing, jiggles his knee for a second, thinking. “Yeah. Okay. Uh. Thanks!”

She inclines her head again, wishes him good night, and leaves. She props the door open for him, too, which, while it doesn’t exactly make him feel *tough*, is pretty nice of her.

And he *can* take a hint, okay.

He goes to bed, and sleeps better than he has for weeks.

By early May, Hermann would describe the general mood in the base as somewhat...twitchy. Everyone appears to be strangely relaxed, *and* on edge. He receives a call from Newton one

afternoon during which he is subjected to some truly spectacular wheedling, inquiring and whining until he finally breaks, more to halt the flow of incessant and epically transparent queries, and admits that he is projecting the end of the year for the next attack.

“October, November, I cannot be absolutely sure,” he says. “As you and I have, of course, *been over already*.” In detail, in email, with diagrams, and more. Newton always insists on hearing him *say* it.

“I’m just checking, dude, because you admitting your uncertainty is a pretty big deal...”

“I don’t have enough *data*,” Hermann snaps.

“Yeah, well, join the club,” Newton sighs at him, the signal poor today, making his voice seem tinny and far away. “I’ve done everything to the samples here I can think of, short of douse them in vodka and sing showtunes at them.”

“You’re saying this is *not* something you do, when left unsupervised by actual adults?”

Here, Newton forgoes speech in favour of smashing the phone into his desk for a bit, in response. Hermann hangs up when he can no longer hear shouting over the top of the noise.

As he said, the mood is strange.

On June 28th, Newton sends him an email with a uniquely awe-inspiring and deliberately clumsily made video of 29 different cats, all singing Happy Birthday, on top of the St. Petersburg church.

The fact that this person is so close in age to him *still* boggles the mind.

He responds later that day.

HGottlieb: *Awful.*

HGottlieb: *Have you slipped on ice and damaged your, admittedly, and unfortunately, impressive brain?*

Geisssszler: *you do KNOW it’s sumemer here now, yeh?*

HGottlieb: *Compared to the current temperature here, that seems sub-atomic.*

Geisssszler: *haha u all meltin, Herm?*

HGottlieb: *Do not call me that.*

HGottlieb: *Yes, it is worse than last year.*

Geisssszler: *fucks 2 be u*

Geisssszler: *SUCKS*

Geisssszler: *shi--*

[APPLICATION TERMINATED]

[APPLICATION TERMINATED]

[REFERENCE RULES OF CONDUCT 2.3: BANNED WORDS, SECTION 9]

On the late afternoon Newt leaves Vladivostok, the July sun is glorious and bright and the backs of his knees feel hot in his jeans. He stands on the edge of the heli pad again as it gets started up with his team-cum-band, all of them wearing huge shades. His have orange edges and wooden frames, Polina's are all black like her soul, but Khamisi *still* manages to look cooler than both of them, with a box of treats for Newt to take home, and giant fake ray-bans. Simple. Cool.

Fuck it.

"I will email recipes," Khamisi promises him, after much begging and Newt threatening to smuggle himself into the back of his car, to go home with him. He has never brought his wife, Alisa, to the base, or spoken much about her, telling them that he prefers instead to have some normality by keeping his home life separate. Newton understands that, and he respects that, he really does, but she is the one who bakes all the treasures that Khamisi brings in and Newton needs a connection to her in his world. *Needs*.

"Please, please. And then you could also come and live with me?" he begs.

Khamisi laughs. "You could not battle my wife for me. She would win, I promise this." He slaps Newt on the shoulder, then hugs him so hard that his back creaks, but Newt could stay there forever, he smells like salt and sunshine— until Polina elbows Khamisi out of the way.

She insinuates herself between them instead, and looks at Newt for a second.

"Pol—?" he begins, but she throws her arms around him so unexpectedly that he gets slapped in the mouth by the whip of her dark hair, instead. She tucks her face into his neck, her shades sticking to his skin, and he barely has time to move his arms before she pulls away, wiping the single tear running out under her shades and down her pale cheekbone. Like a china doll that has come to *life*. She kisses his cheeks *hard*, and pushes a full packed lunch into his hands.

He stares at it, then up at her, a little stunned.

"Is this...*homemade*?"

"I do *not* cook," she reminds him, but her lips quirk.

Khamisi says *Aww* and throws an arm around her shoulders, and though she lifts her chin, she

visibly relaxes a little into him. Newt grins, shaking his head at them both, and makes to go, but:

“Photograph!” Khamisi insists, crowding Newt in towards him as well.

He takes a backward shot on his own phone of them in the curve of his arms that is just...a real Pinnacle, in Newt’s life. He has never been this attractive. He feels like a king.

“Once upon a time that would have been a *classic* Myspace shot,” he tells them, sagely.

“You are old,” Polina frowns. Khamisi nods. Newt shoves them both away, horrified, then ducks and runs towards the growing noise of the helicopter, under the spinning blades.

As he’s climbing in, Khamisi shouts after him. “Newton!”

He stows his bag quick, then leans out of the door to hear, one hand on the handle and the other cupped around his ear like an, apparently, old man. “What?”

“Band name! We have made decision!” Khamisi points at Polina, who puts her hands around her mouth to shout.

“We are The *Wegener–Bergeron–Findeisen* process, da?”

Newton chuckles all the way back to Tokyo.

Also, though, he plans. Plans a lot. How to talk to Hermann on the first day back and request that he maybe put up with, and work with, Newton, for the future. Forever? This is what he needs to do. After an hour or so Newt decides that though he’s not *exactly* sure how he’ll word it, he’ll just wing the words at the time. Trust his brain and mouth can work in perfect partnership for one day. He works best off-the-cuff. He’s excited to see Hermann, too, and that’s a lot better than 6 months ago, when he was just excited to try and strip him slowly, one button and one kiss and one delicious flush at a time, and there’s always that, yeah, but friends...colleagues? No, *friends* - friends don’t watch other friend’s asses as they pace in front of blackboards, so no more of that.

He sleeps another third of the flight, and watches Tokyo approach for the rest. When he finally gets out of the airport it’s practically midnight, so he hops a taxi back, but asks the driver to stop suddenly when he spots the familiar hypermarket a street away from the Shatterdome.

Wow it is a depressing, shitty thing, being an adult. Because he knows, idling in the taxi for a moment, that he should really buy food and supplies before he heads back to the dome, or he will wake up tomorrow with shit nothing. But hello, *tired* - having to wait an hour at passport control whilst his record was checked as usual, because not even working for the PPDC can eradicate the arrest note on his from the *one time* he and his buddy Chris thought it would be a good idea to try skating all the way down the Empire State Building’s stairs - and okay, yes it was supposed to be *closed* at the time but it made more *sense* to break in and go when no-one would be around, they didn’t want to *hurt* anybody, and his Youtube channel had gone crazy for that vid.

How this was still such a big a deal when monsters were attacking parts of the world continued to frustrate him.

It’s humid already, still, *again*, and Newt does not want to walk around under bright lights all damp and zoned out. He probably needs to wash. He wants to sleep. He’s also a bit wired, a bit hyper, though. His head is still full of the Russian phrases drummed into him over his 6 months, circling back around with the Japanese from before, his 2 native tongues, an Antokolsky extract (*You yourself no effort ever spared / Light’s velocity you boldly squared / Multiplied by mass you then went tracing / Cosmogonic views that long lay wasting*) and a Depeche Mode song . He knows he

won't sleep yet.

He agitates over it for a bit, then gives an aborted huff, pays the cabbie, and jumps out into the lingering night heat.

It's unbearable, immediately; he's already fighting his shirt off and stuffing it into his holdall as he heads inside the 24hr pit of food. It's only a black wifebeater - a term he has always thought needs to *die a death* - underneath, but fuck it. He can rock it.

He knows this place - the AC is fucked but it's the only place that sells American and European food for three blocks, so here he is, throwing his bag up onto one shoulder.

Sweat, grimy shop, and on into continued adulthood.

Hermann has 45% of what is on his shopping list, so far, carefully arranged in the trolley in front of him into equilateral triangles. The market is happily almost entirely empty, which is no surprise - most residents escape the humidity of the day by utilising air-conditioning wherever they can, which is particularly *not* here, and particularly now, so late into the night, Hermann is almost alone.

The background music may be awful, but at least it's not too loud. He's just spent some time in the gym, slipping in alone after everyone else had gone to bed - and bizarre as the thought still is, of *choosing* to sit on a bike and work the tender throb up from his knee and into his thigh and finally, away, it is an unusual piece of information that he has continued to keep entirely to himself. The thought of Dietrich or Vanessa knowing is *dreadful* - or worse, Bastien, or Mother - no, no, worse still, *Karla*, who would be wonderfully and horribly *encouraging*, and probably suggest new stretches. She's recently discovered Pilates, but more difficult is the fact that he knows that she still feels guilty, for nothing that actually was her fault, simply an averted collision with nevertheless femur shattering impact, and Hermann's own wilful determinism.

It really isn't worth mentioning, thus.

His hair is distastefully damp at the back, above his collar. This is partially from his shower, and partially from the slight sweat he worked up whilst walking slowly here, undoing all the rewards of having suffered the ordeal of the *communal* shower block - though at least it was deserted, and he could keep his shoes on. After over a year he really ought to be used to this horrendous humidity, the way it lingers even toward midnight, but he is bloody *not*.

Of course, this unpleasant moisture on the back of his neck *would* be cooling pleasantly under the air-conditioning, *were it actually working*, but this is the closest location to the Shatterdome. As it is, this short-sleeved shirt is thin and by undoing the top button, he's comfortable enough. He is *comfortable*. He used his cane to get here, as support, but feels confident enough even now to have it hooked over the handle of the trolley. Admittedly his knee does ache, but in a satisfying way: 20 full minutes on a bike, during which he rubbed the heel of his hand along the scars under his shorts only occasionally, and managed to feel not entirely stupid, with his tablet propped on the control pad so that he could look over notes for the next day.

This is...pleasing.

He turns into the confectionary aisle without entirely paying attention, considering the list in his

small notebook, glasses on his nose. His eyes are drawn by colour and familiar, curling patterns in the periphery, though, and he looks up to realise where he is, slowing. Pausing.

Bugger his sweet tooth, but, he *has* run out of the spiced biscuits they occasionally have...

He peruses the choices and, giving in, he leans a little on the edge of the trolley and bends to have a look—

“Hermann?!”

He jerks upward, quickly.

Newton is at the other end of the aisle, a large bag in the front of his own otherwise empty trolley, his hair entirely wild, and wearing not actual clothing but a *vest* to shop in, which is typically vulgar and distasteful of him, and shows the curling ends of the ink up his arms that Hermann has only seen once whilst quickly exiting the changing room. His clavicle and tops of his shoulders are bare, his eyebrows raised above his glasses. He’s staring down the aisle at Hermann, who probably looks equally idiotic with his mouth open. He shuts it.

“...Dr. Geiszler.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

ETA: Now with added artwork by the incredible SANNAM! <3333

German Translations

Schlüsselbein - clavicle/collarbones

Schulterblatt - scapula/shoulderblades

du bist krank - you are ill

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Oh come on, 6 months and you drop first names?”

Newton shakes his head, then starts to wheel his trolley down the aisle toward Hermann, who absolutely does not step backwards. He doesn't have *time*; Newton is still talking, approaching.

“We spoke about biopolymers *yesterday* – or, technically now two days ago, in case you've somehow *forgotten*,” he points out, apparently because he is in a *rush*, kicking off and putting his feet on the bar of his trolley to sail down the aisle and skidding to a stop next to Hermann.

Their trolleys collide, a little, making Hermann raise an eyebrow carefully whilst Newton flails and twist his away. “*Shit*, woops— hey.” He stops, adjusting his posture, and then smiles at Hermann. “Hey, Hermann.”

Hermann takes his glasses off, tucks his notebook into his pocket, and attempts not to scowl, or smile back. He feels....wobbly. This is entirely unexpected, out of their usual circumstances, and he has had no time to prepare. Additionally, his erstwhile - *and* current - lab partner is half-naked. “Hello, Newton.”

Newton looks like he might go in for a handshake, or, appallingly, a *hug*, but he doesn't, thankfully. He takes a breath, grins, then droops over the handlebar of his trolley instead, his wrists hanging. “What's. What's up?”

“I'm fine, thank you. You?”

“Good, good.” Newton is looking at him oddly. His glasses are dirty, the panes smeared a little. Hermann flexes his thigh once whilst thinking of what to say. He's still utterly *thrown*, and his leg is getting pins and needles. There's no need to be *embarrassed* about something that the other person didn't note and still doesn't know, Hermann reminds himself, again. *You are a grown man*, for God's sake.

“...Your flight was good, I trust?”

“Nope, crashed and burned.” Newton leans and peers into Hermann's trolley at the orderly goods, glancing up again at him with amusement. “Nice.”

He looks— the same, really. Hermann almost expected there to be something different, but of course not. Noticeably the same as when he left - neither paler, nor more freckled. Hermann notices

instead that he was wrong, there *is* something in the other trolley, and makes a show of looking into it.

“Did you stop here just for those jelly beans, or are you planning to get something with actual nutritional value?”

Newton chuckles, and taps his temple. “Got a list up here. Thought I’d be productive with my inability to sleep.”

“Oh, you *are* going to pay for them, this time?”

The other scientist tilts his head, surprised, then laughs. “You remembered that?”

“Your larceny? How could I forget.” He starts pushing his trolley forward; Newton spins his own around and comes up next to him again.

“How’s your knee?” he asks, nodding toward Hermann’s cane, not in use.

Hermann almost pauses, but smoothly keeps going. “Fine.”

“Seems better - that’s great!”

“A little.” He really does not want to discuss it; Harold tried to mention it the other day and Hermann had just *looked* at him until he stopped, essentially because he wasn’t sure exactly what to say but also because there is no place for *nosy* gits in his workspace.

More than this one, anyway.

He isn’t sure he could cope with *two* colleagues prodding at him constantly.

“Cool, my man. Cool.”

Hermann nods, spotting something as he does, snagging the biscuits he wants on the way out of the aisle as he turns left, placing them carefully in the bottom-right corner of his trolley.

Newton follows him.

“So how’s the base doing? Anya emailed me to say she’s being transferred to Anchorage, what the fuck is that about?”

His accent has changed, ever so slightly; it’s more Berliner on the vowels, longer. He doesn’t seem to have noticed. Hermann glances at him curiously but he’s looking around him, still slumped over the handlebar of his trolley as they walk but staring down the dairy aisle now, mouth open in thought.

“Everyone is fine. She leaves next week.”

“Yeah, shit.” Newton looks back at him, just in time to veer his trolley away again before it scuffs Hermann’s once more. “That sucks.”

“Yes.”

They approach the baked goods. Hermann turns his back for a moment to choose a loaf from the racks in front of them, considering carefully, then reaching up for the correct one; brown, small. He squeezes it slightly in both hands to test the resistance, the crust. Perfect. He packs it away and makes to move on.

“Can— Yeah, can I get one of those too?”

He turns; Newton is pointing to the section of white rolls and flatbreads next to Hermann, leaning back against his own trolley. He looks fidgety and motionless all at once, the lights bouncing off his bare shoulders, the colours of his curving ink, and his dirty glasses. Hermann sighs, scowls, and rotates again – it is as though he exists just to *torment*, some days. ‘How far can I test someone’s patience *today*’, he must think, and by someone, always mean *Hermann*.

He mutters to himself, putting his weight on his good leg and stretching across the shelves to look, picks a packet at random, out of spite, curling his fingers on it to snag it down. When he turns back Newton is staring, but starts, nods, runs his fingers fruitlessly and quickly through his hair, then opens his hands suddenly.

Making as if to *catch* it.

Hermann narrows his eyes at this. Oh *no*. Newton just crooks his fingers, though, so Hermann sighs and, glancing around him to check, throws it - gently, underarm. A little awkward. If Newton notices, though, he doesn’t show it, just catches it, looks at it, takes a deep breath, and drops it into his trolley.

“Thanks,” he says, looking up, strangely intent.

The odd, half-naked man of Hermann’s dreams. *Nightmares*.

Hermann clears his throat, once. “Of course.”

He moves towards the meat section, next, his mind racing, highly aware of Newton behind him, then next to him. They pass two women arguing softly in Japanese about what type of champagne to buy, apparently, a teenager chewing gum as he considers a line of spirits, *idiot*, a staff member re-arranging a display of cans. Hermann had a lot of things he wanted to say upon Newton’s return, organised thus:

- Approach him in the lab, sit him down, convince him to reign in his temper for once and listen -
- - listen to Hermann’s proposition that they work together on their main goals, calculating the exact location and all possible vulnerabilities of both the Breach and any kaiju that might come next -
- - next, because whilst he expects another by the end of the year, he’s viciously, unhappily unable to be *precise*, but he can improve upon this, and –
- - and he *has* come to appreciate Newton’s unique skillset, thus would like to suggest that they work in partnership, somewhat, for it has become clear to Hermann that they can do so -
- - do so, the handicap of Newton’s mental and social instability notwithstanding –
- - notwithstanding, because Hermann potentially will need him, good God, he *respects* him, somewhat, even admires him, on occasion, and they might be able to do good work -
- - good work, *if* Newton can accept the idea and agree to work in a more orderly way?

Somehow, now, a strangely lit supermarket at 1.19am does not seem the place.

He must re-think.

“Is this the bread you made that sandwich in?”

Sigh.

He stops and turns around again. Newton has paused in the centre of the cross-section between

home goods and cosmetics, frowning down into the empty space of his trolley, and possibly, conceptually, his mind.

“Sandwich?”

“*Your* larceny. The cheese one.”

Hermann walks back a couple of steps. “The...sandwich I gave you roughly 9 months ago?”

“Yeah.”

He tries, then gives up on anything he could possibly say to that, puts his glasses back on, and checks the baked goods in Newton’s trolley. “...Yes, it would appear to be so.”

“Neat.” Newton looks up, grinning, but the colour of his expression has changed; he seems suddenly focussed, urgent, and he reaches out and puts a hand on Hermann’s arm. “Thanks for that by the way.”

Hermann looks down at the hand, the neat, short nails, the ludicrous ring on the little finger, and flicks his gaze up at Newton again. “For a sandwich last year.”

“Yeah. And for the others, actually. I sort of. I thought about it, whilst I was away.” Newton *squeezes* his arm. “Khamisi brought in cakes, but *he* never actually made them.”

Hermann is most definitely lost. Newton’s hand is damp, and Hermann wishes he’d gone for long sleeves now because it’s on his skin, a little calloused, very warm. “You are welcome, and, *insane*.”

Newton nods, grinning crookedly, and takes his hand off to rub the back of his neck. “Cool, yeah.” Without warning, then, he pokes Hermann in the chest, right in the sternum. “You were totally looking after me.”

Hermann cannot speak, for a moment. What in *Hell*. Nobody pokes him. “I had, and retain, no intention of clearing up after you if you died in the laboratory.”

Newton snorts. “Yeah, yeah. I’ve realised that’s why we work so well together, see.”

“I do occasionally prevent you from starving, yes.”

“And you drive me to work harder, to rub it in your *face*, and *I* drag you kicking and screaming into actually expressing yourself outside of your own head.” Newton makes a hand gesture that does not entirely make sense, frowning at his hands as he does it. “You...push, I pull?”

Hermann looks briefly to the harshly lit ceiling for assistance. “I suppose you call it *working*. I call it daily lessons in ineptitude.”

“So you admit you’ve learned things from me.” That grin again, asymmetrical, boyish.

“Only when you learn how to put letters and numbers in the correct order.” He makes his own physical demonstration, sharply.

“Shit,” Newton laughs, throwing his arms wide. “I really *did* miss you, dude.”

“Oh Good Lord.” Newton is having a breakdown, and Hermann rolls his eyes again, stomach swooping up and down in any case, the tips of his ears hot. He realises that he is blushing, and viciously hates everything in a square mile radius. Newton pokes him again, this time in the arm,

and he jerks, tries to kick him, which Newton easily dodges. Newton is *smiling*.

“We’re having a moment. I am for real touched, here.”

He fights his own, again. “Newton.”

“Yeah?” His face is open, his green eyes warm. Oh *scheiße* yes, Hermann did miss him. Did want him. Lips on his rough jaw, hands inside his shirt, wanting to slide them against his still (he thinks) un-inked soft belly, press to feel the shape of ribcage underneath his sides, to twist his wrist and slip fingers down past his belt to take him, rough, in hand, perhaps, the thickness of him, to just once *curl* his fingers - to have the pad of Newton’s thumb slide and press against his mouth so that he can kiss it before it slips inside, against his teeth. The skin of his upper chest is so clean, still, his smaller body so appealing with the surprising width of his shoulders, the curve of his throat, the arch of his *Schlüsselbein* with tattooed colours just touching it, where Hermann wants to put his lips and tongue, and yes, his jaw is lovely, but. His presence, his personality, his wit. His mind. *This* is actually what Hermann needs.

He missed *him*.

He swallows down the carnal ideas once, and for all.

This is his lab partner, God help him. The one he, stupidly, wants to keep.

“Do *not* touch *me*.”

Newton laughs, nods, and salutes him badly. “Okay, okay.” He wheels on past, and heads towards the fish counter, whistling.

Hermann, not *entirely* sure what just happened, suspects that he just agreed to something. Or, suspiciously, as though he was one-upped somewhere.

He scowls, touching his mouth as he thinks about it, then follows, but not before giving in and discreetly wiping the sweat from the back of his neck.

By the time Hermann catches up, Newt is already staring at the assorted invertebrates, cephalopods and fish parts, laid out on white ice, whilst his heart stops thudding heavily against his eardrums.

So fascinating. He has always loved the fish counters, the markets mom used to take him to in Berlin, then in NY – how everything is laid out so perfectly to see, like specimens, but fresh. The outside and the internal, the beauty of the scales, the shapes, the tentacles, and all that biological construction within, acceptably laid out to see and decide between. He went to a fish market at 4am here once with Joe and it smelled *so bad* oh my god, it was sick. The flashes of silver and jewel-reds inside.

“These are always so *varied*,” he says, wonderingly, pointing at a peach-pink squid to show Hermann as he approaches. ["Look, look at the mantle."](#) I've been thinking about this - you'd expect the kaiju to have larger variations of these, all that swimming from the deep, but the change in size averages so far compared to that of mandibles, for example, is bizarre. There's no apparent genetic pattern..."

It is something he wants to explore, and he will do, in the lab tomorrow, but then he segues unexpectedly into a new feeling, spotting something else. He's letting his mind just trip ahead and his mouth follow, here, to recover from Hermann all close, sharp, with damp hair and his top button undone, a lot of skin on show all down his arms.

It feels a bit like when he defended his first dissertation, when he was 14; he had a virus and a fever of 104 but he'd recently been almost-diagnosed with Manic Personality Disorder too and no, *fuck you*, he didn't want to take any pills, or any medication, not for that and not even for *this*, so he defended it with sweat running down his temples, dripping in his eyes, his wrists clammy and the room spinning, because he wanted it to be all *him*. His work. *Him him him*. Take him as he is or, don't, he knows he's okay, he is capable, he's a fucking rock star. He *is great*.

"Cuttlefish!" he says, spotting it. "Awesome."

Hermann purses his lips as he observes. "You were unquestionably the child that poked dead birds, weren't you?" He nods at himself. "Then brought them home to play with, like a cat."

"If anyone has the typical cat personality here it's you," Newt replies, turning to him. "Antisocial bitchface, hackles, and inability to show actual affection? Check."

"Cats are perfectly affectionate if you don't slather all over them."

"Ah! Of course." Newt's voice getting louder causes the man behind the counter to flick his attention their way, over the top of a magazine. He drops his gaze to the ink on Newt's arms, a second after, but Newt's used to that, just keeps it in his awareness in case. "*You* are the most cat person that ever lived."

Hermann lifts an eyebrow, slowly. "*Meaning?*"

He is possibly talking too quickly. "That you'll be an old cat man with knitting and even crazier hair and dead...parrots and...shit." Newt trails off, running out on the image slightly, and shivers, rubbing the top of his bare arms - which could be caused by the wonderful cold coils of air coming from the coolers - which he has *noticed* Hermann carefully allowing to breathe against the back of his neck and wrists, no matter how subtle he thinks he is being, turning just a little there - or by the true depth of the horror he just pictured.

"I do not know *where* to start unravelling the psychological trauma behind that image," Hermann says, in agreement, turning his shoulders a little more towards the cooler air. If it weren't covered in fish detritus, and if Hermann wouldn't *shriek*, Newt'd be tempted to pick up some ice to cool himself off. Or throw it at him.

"You don't—" he begins, then gives up. "Oh, *whaaatever*." He knows Hermann found that amusing, deep down, so he makes what he knows is a childish gesture with his tongue, then orders some squid in what is almost flawless Japanese, *bitch*. He drops it into his trolley with a satisfying and disgusting *splat*, just for Hermann's benefit.

They walk in oddly companionable quiet for a time. Their conversation has a slower flow than normal, containing mostly observations, queries about things they've already covered. Newt's adrenaline is skittering away, and maybe Hermann is tired too, after the shock of bumping into him. Newt gets it.

Hermann takes out his little notebook again and logically crosses items off his list as gets them. His order is so obviously planned in such a way as to be an efficient journey around the small market, and normally this would drive Newt crazy but he feels all... fond about it, tonight, instead.

He's content to grab whatever strikes him as it does, and watch Hermann sideways.

He *really* wants to ask what Hermann's doing here at such a weird hour, too, but he remembers (vividly) that Hermann gets pissy when people are too nosy, so he reins it in. They've just had a moment, so. A serious *moment*. Newt never expected the direction of his life to change dramatically in a hypermarket in Tokyo at gone 1am, but hey. He feels light. Free.

Zen.

He's truly let it go.

Okay, okay, *yeah*, after taking a little moment there, asking Hermann to get bread for him and watching the long line of him, his hands working, stretching like he does at his blackboards, and allowing himself to imagine – just one last-gasp fantasy hurts no-one and this was the one he's had a few times, so he went with it in because *whine*, almost 4D reality right there, all of that on show for him, so *what*? Newt is weak, and just a little taste to get him through. Through *not* doing it anymore.

If he's *gross*, then fine, he doesn't give a shit - thinking about stepping in close behind Hermann at the boards and reaching around, undoing the top buttons on his shirt, pressing all against his back and letting Hermann feel how hard he is for him, how good he'll make it be, going up on the balls of his feet to press lips against the nape of his neck and letting the pads of his fingers stroke down Hermann's bared throat - the *sternocleidomastoid* and *platysma* muscles, the graceful bones of his chest, collarbone, *Schlüsselbein*, he can work in German or Latin here, *What do you want?* Breath, breath. Mouthing the top of Hermann's spine as it gets finally revealed, the cervical vertebrae, C1, C2, C3 and down; his scapula, his *Schulterblatt*, his oh so pale *skin*, thinking of taking it slow, or maybe not, maybe dropping to his knees hard and turning him by his slim hips to pull him out of his pants and suck him there and then, thinking of his heavy, long cock, of Hermann tugging his hair sharply and telling him *oh, you—oh, good boy* as he opens his mouth and lets his jaw go slack, or of sucking greedily at the tip, mouthing it, so smooth and slippery, nudging up at his lips as Hermann moans - or of kissing and biting at his hip bones - or of Hermann shuddering and pressing into his hands—

Maybe Newt ought to feel more guilty for this blatant objectification. Which, he *does*, hey. But no-one's gonna know. One-time indulgence. Cross his heart, zip his lips.

He's done.

Fuck, can he just say, though. In his defence? Walking into someone looking like everything of your recent, weird dreams - he didn't even know Hermann *owned* short sleeved shirts, he could kill *everyone* and *everything* - and still deciding to stick with deciding *not* to act on it?

Either *du bist krank*, buddy, or this is some serious character growth here.

He's proud of himself. Aaand hates himself, but he can live with both. Seriously, this is worth it. It's worth it. He wants Hermann by his *side*, for his own good.

He's taking one for the *world*, here.

Someone, somewhere, loudly, better be grateful.

“Explain to me how it is possible that you dislike cats,” Hermann wonders aloud, again, as they near the exits.

He has been irritated by this throughout the entire time it took Newt to choose a new deodorant - having left his in Vladivostok, predictably - and that was a fair amount, even when Hermann began tapping his foot at him to hurry him up. He *would* act as though they were all deserving of his attention, picking up every bloody option to survey it instead of simply choosing the same brand that one has been using since puberty, as *normal* people do. “After all, you like *kaiju*—”

“Shut up Hermann, I don’t *like* kaiju—”

“I *know*, Newton, do keep up—” He shoots Newton a look as they reach the checkouts - he always insists on protesting as if he truly believes Hermann *could* think he likes them, rather than simply admires them, which is absolutely different, and something that Hermann has come to see with time. “Yet,” he continues, choosing a checkout and squeezing past his trolley to start unpacking. “You have distaste for felines?”

Newton shrugs, beginning to lay out his items on the conveyor belt of the intrigued looking cashier next to Hermann’s in predictable disorder, whilst Hermann starts logically, with the heaviest items.

“I don’t *not* like them, I think they’re awesome. But they *are* super unpredictable, which stresses me out. I never know if they’re gonna bite me or...rub up against me.”

He makes a face, but he doesn’t look entirely *unhappy* about it, Hermann thinks.

“Typical.” Hermann turns away and lifts his body wash and a top-up for his black pepper out of his trolley, laying them out, and reaching for his cane next. “If it doesn’t slobber all over you and beg you for attention, you’re not interested.”

“Okay, as you just pointed out, that doesn’t exactly qualify what I do or don’t like.”

He snorts. “Ah. You get offended on any occasion that I joke that you like kaiju but *you’re* allowed to say it. Of *course*.”

“No, you *fuck*,” Newton snaps. “I *mean* that *I* like *you*, even though everyone else is scared of you, and let’s be honest here, you’re pretty awful.”

Silence, for a moment.

As close to, anyway, with that *infernal music* playing in the background.

Hermann’s cashier fidgets, her dark eyes wide. Hermann may well be giving off a high pitched wail of rage, or that is just in his mind, or it’s the ‘song’ playing in the background. Difficult to be sure. He turns, slowly, to stare across the barrier between the two checkouts at Newton - who has paused with the packet of squid in his hand, going very still.

“Did you *just* compare me to the kaiju?” His voice quavers, edging somewhere between high and low at the same time.

Newton opens his mouth, closes it again. “...Um.”

“Speak. *Carefully*.”

“No.” Hermann nods, and then shakes, his head. “Nope.”

“Curious. It very much *sounded* that way.”

“Yeah, well.” Newton laughs, a little hysterically. “I’m jet-lagged!”

“Vladivostok is three hours away.”

“Yep,” Newton continues, and says nothing else, instead turning away to furiously finish throwing all his items onto the conveyor belt.

“The complexities of ‘Yep’ as an expression of self do not work. In fact, I would suggest they are so insignificant as to *cancel each other out!*” Hermann says, *loudly*.

“Oh yeah? Yeah? Well, the complexities of *you* as an expression of *yourself* do not work—”

Newton shoves his now almost empty trolley (his duffel bag is still inside - will he even *notice*, Hermann wonders) down towards the collection in the corner, moodily, but continues to shout back over his shoulder. His scapula push through the back of his vest and his voice *carries*. “*Nothing* about you is logical, you are actually the *worst* - though the Elvis thing I get, I mean you *are* perpetually stuck in the 50s, after all.”

Hermann gapes, furious, flinging his now empty trolley towards the end of the checkout so that he can push it to the corner himself, later. “I *told* you, that is my *sister’s*—”

“Hermann I have known you for long enough now that I’m sure we can both admit that it’s *you* who likes Elvis—” Newton jams his trolley into one queue, then lunges back to grab Hermann’s, “—and that’s cool, he’s great, he’s the *King* or whatever, so let’s just admit you have some sense of rhythm in your soul and be done with it?”

He stows both trolleys and turns around, panting with exertion and rage, and looks at Hermann with his eyebrows raised, folding his arms as if to say, *Yep?*

He’s right, of course. Hermann stares, for a second. It’s his mother who is a fan, and thus where he gets his affinity for the music from - but he learned long ago not to share that morsel of information about shared maternal taste with *anybody* or risk retaliation. Karla, on the other hand, would sooner listen to the death throes of a *puppy* than Elvis, preferring instead a number of horrible German electronic bands that he is fairly sure Newton would dance with excitement around the supermarket to, were he to find out.

This is, however, plenty enough insight and shared ground for one night.

Hermann snarls as answer and gets his wallet out, starting on unfolding the correct amount of cash without waiting for his cashier to finish totalling everything up, as he knows the price already.

“I have *asked* you not to call me that in public,” he says, instead.

“And you still think I *care*...” Newton remembers to nab his duffel bag, surprisingly, and lugs it back over, digging in his back pocket for his own wallet at the same time so distractedly that he almost pulls his jeans down, *again*. His underwear is red today, *fantastic*.

Hermann seethes, counts coins, lays them out carefully, and throws hatred over his shoulder.

“I’ve *so* missed this,” he spits, sarcastic - but telling, perhaps, because Newton glances at him, his cheeks pink, scowling so hard that his forehead is all wrinkled, then unexpectedly breaks into a grin. He drops his bag heavily at the end of the counter so that he can flip one middle finger at Hermann, and starts to paper-bag his goods fluidly.

“Likewise,” he says, smoothly, half to Hermann and half to himself.

And that’s...that.

Roll on the next kaiju, the next problem. Hermann can do this. With *him*. By unexpected, implausible chance, they might even be able to succeed.

By jove, *they* can *do* this.

He’s almost looking forward to it.

When they’re finished, Newt doesn’t offer to take Hermann’s bag - he does not *have a death wish*, even if his mouth is running away with him enough tonight to possibly get him painfully murdered - but he notices Hermann acquiescing to what must be his body’s demands and using his cane on the way outside, so he flags them down a cab.

They argue over who’s going to pay for it during the short drive back, then over who will get the change.

“Come to think of it, *I’ll* keep it – you compared me to the *alien monsters*, so you can sit and be quiet.” Hermann folds the notes and tucks them into his pocket, signals to the driver that they can stop.

Newt *screeches* with frustration and throws himself out of the car, slamming the door when he gets out. Then he re-opens it to apologise to the driver, because he is not a total asshole, and shuts it more carefully.

At the trunk, Hermann elbows him so that he can get to his stuff first, and Newt bites his cheek not to shove him back, throwing the strap of his duffel jerkily over his chest and grabbing his own paper bag before Hermann can put his long fingers anywhere near it, holding it tight to his chest to protect it.

As they enter the Shatterdome and shuffle into the elevator, Hermann slows behind him. A few seconds into their descent he taps Newt on the hip with his cane to get his attention.

“Is your pass somewhere easily accessible?” he asks.

Newt thinks, and probably gets the glazed look of someone who can’t remember anything, anymore, because Hermann pinches the bridge of his nose, sighing.

“Of course. You can borrow mine. Just *ensure* you return it in the morning and don’t lose it.”

Newt rolls his eyes. *Jesus*. “I’ll *ensure* that I lick it 42 times, too.”

Back to normal.

Bring on the next few months, Newt thinks, static-hummingly-angry and deeply *amused*, as Hermann grimaces at him in the elevator as they approach their floor.

Bring it. Fucking. *On*.

Chapter End Notes

Guys. I promise. I really, really promise with blood, sweat and tears and hours of fervent writing that they
WILL KISS ONE DAY

This fic is basically me needing to understand how in the world these two weren't getting married and making metaphorical science babies from day bloody one, which can only mean 9 years of epic UST and idiocy, so. Uh. I'M SORRY THEY ARE DICKHEADS THIS IS THE ONLY VIABLE EXPLANATION. But things will move more quickly from hereon in. We hit movie timeline soon. I WILL GET THERE. TRUST ME

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Before this one, I really just want to give a big shout out to everyone who's reading, because afsaaskfjlas I've never written anything this long - at least nothing close for almost a decade - and I've worked so hard on this. Every comment really means so much. Thank you so much to everyone for taking the time to let me know you're reading, and for sticking with this. I LOVE YOUR BEAUTIFUL FACES. Particularly thank you to the lovely ama, for her insight and attention by email. <3

Would like to also shout out to the INCREDIBLE SANNAM for drawing the most beautiful art of the earlier chapters because I am still not over it and never will be. ever. EVER!!!! DEATH

Translations

Von Bastien hätte ich das ja erwartet, aber von dir? - I'd have expected this from Bastien, but *you*?

Yr oeddw'n wedi gobeithio y byddech yn yr un i ddal i mi - I'd hoped you'd be the one to catch me

Ypa - Hooray

knorke - amazing

Du bist ein Arsch - You are an arse/ass

Kann sein - Maybe?

The next kaiju comes in November and is nicknamed Raythe by someone over in the Anchorage Shatterdome, within half an hour of the siren announcement.

“Good job, buddy,” Newton tells him, distractedly, slapping Hermann’s shoulder as he watches the monster on the screen, rampaging its way through the Okhotsk Sea toward Vladivostok.

Hermann had predicted this to within a couple of weeks, that’s all. As if that was anywhere *close* to as accurate as he needs be. He knows it isn’t good enough.

He *also* knows that Newton is on first-name basis with at least one of the teams in the Jaegers out there, if not more. Not to mention, everyone in the base that will face being crushed if Raythe continues his trajectory.

He looks sideways, carefully. Newton is staring intently at the data firing all over the screen in front of them, his elbows on the desk and his chin in his hands, his fingers on his mouth. He looks as though he wants to bite them.

“Newton?” he prompts.

“Hm?” Newton hardly glances back at him.

Ah.

Hermann flicks his eyes to Harold, who nods and smiles a little at him, then steps aside, letting him

in next to Newton. Hermann sits heavily in the vacated chair and stretches his leg out; he is still paying for two months previously and his knee is swollen, even though he's wearing a strap on it today, loaned by Doctor Itami and done up tightly underneath his favourite woollen trousers.

He had indeed danced with Karla at her wedding in September, at least, in the local church where they grew up, after most definitely *not* crying when Father walked her down the aisle - or at least, not as much as Dietrich, thankfully. He and Bastien had canted their eyes carefully sideways when their elder brother's blonde head bowed, his hands covering his face as he was wracked with sobs, and whilst Hermann might have had *one* tear, yes, and Bastien *potentially* the same, when they looked at Dietrich, aghast, they then immediately caught each others' gaze and silently communicated their fierce and immediate promise to each other to *bear the family name with more grace*.

Good Lord, one would have thought being elected as the *Hochzeitslader* would have been enough for Dietrich to contend with. It ought to have provided the perfect opportunity to get all of his emotion and puppyish excitement out.

One would, as usual, be *wrong*.

Hermann's leg had held well enough for him to dance with Karla, as he'd hoped, but he might have pushed it too far spinning Vanessa in a waltz, after that. And two more beers. At which point Dietrich strode - *stork-legged* - over to cut in, and Vanessa had raised an eyebrow, but *allowed it*, which had obviously meant that Hermann had had to *leave the room* in case he vomited all over his best suit - whereupon he got dragged into finding his cousin's seven year old son. Sigh.

Eventually, Bastien had been the one to find him, playing outside – Hermann, on the other hand, had stumbled upon the *Bride*. Sitting cross-legged under a table, in her dress. On the *floor*.

She'd been eating a slice of cake, and smacked her head against the top of the table in surprise when he lifted the tablecloth and bent to glance underneath it.

"Ow- Scheiße!"

He'd been *shocked*. "Von Bastien hätte ich das ja erwartet, aber von *dir*?" he'd said, tablecloth lifted over his head, and yes *fully* aware that it was streaming down his back like some sort of ridiculous cape, thank you.

Karla had just shrugged, guiltily, scrunching up her nose, checking her hairstyle - delicately twisted up in curls and held with little pins, like white coronas and starbursts all over her head that he privately thought was very lovely - hadn't been flattened by the table. "I just needed a *moment*. Alone. With cake. Yr oeddw'n wedi gobeithio y byddech yn yr un i ddod o hyd i mi," she'd replied, and smiled at him so hard the lines on her face crinkled up, like he knows his do. She has the same colour eyes as he does and it had struck him then, again, how pretty they are, on her.

In response to her lexical prowess, he'd just scowled. He was terribly out of practice with their Mother's, ironically, *mother* tongue, and she *knew it*. She was always best at languages, of all of them.

"All I heard there was that you hoped for cake," he'd grumbled. She'd just widened her eyes in faux-innocence when she saw his annoyance, then laughed, softly, and reached over to grab him by the lapel of his suit jacket. She'd tugged him gently, carefully.

"Come and share my cake, Hermann," she'd said, and kissed his ear when he sighed and shuffled underneath with her.

Later, she'd gotten drunk and cried *again* about him not smashing into her the last time they'd ever gone skiing together, as if it was such a big problem, still, and he'd pointed out *again* that it was years and years before then, and hardly the end of the world, unlike potentially *now*, and her new husband Max had nodded at Hermann knowingly and taken her off to dance her way into a less reflective mood.

Later, still, Hermann's knee had flared up under him totally when he was crawling drunkenly into his hotel bed. He'd had to sit on the floor as the room span for a bit, propped up against the bed, bile sharp in his throat.

Thus, now, two months later: he is still paying for it. It feels about as bad today as Newton looks.

Jiggling his own knee nervously, eyes zooming across the images on screen, he appears...tense.

"What's your mass perspective?" Hermann asks, to draw the fixed attention his way.

Newton looks at him, then, for a second, with his dark-ringed gaze. "Gotta be Cat II, yeah, but the limbs are longer. Paws – *hands?* - seem to end more with digits, than claws. Three of them, opposable." He pushes his glasses up his nose.

"Any direct hits, yet?"

"Three." Newton ticks them off. "Abdomen, second supplementary limb, and even the mandible, but it's unaffected."

"The face injury was a Jaeger fist, though, not ammunition?" Hermann clarifies, remembering what he'd heard as he hop-skipped into the room, in a rush, heavily using his cane.

"Yeah." Newton shrugs. "You'd think being hit by a *Jaeger* would slow it, but they just keep at it. They reported a three foot gash to the left temple and leaking Blue from the abdomen, but it's like a rabid dog, doesn't notice its injuries..." His voice trails off, wondering, but also watching and listening sharply.

They sit together, taking in the fresh crackle of the radio correspondence, the descriptions of tactics, positions, attacks. A Jaeger named Cherno Alpha is in battle with Raythe, now, and it is... nasty.

Hermann lays his fingers on Newton's sleeve at one point, because he is scribbling notes on what he can see so violently that the table judders and the screen jumps an inch to the left. Newton starts and stares at his fingers, then up; Hermann lifts an eyebrow, until he nods and moves his arm away.

They all watch the entire battle, breaking for supplies if needs be, discussing developments, arguing as a team, predicting, being proven correct or wrong, for the hours it takes until Cherno Alpha finally destroys the kaiju. Then Agnieszka bows her head, praying, quietly, under her breath, at that, whilst Harold cheers and high-fives Anya, then wobbles so hard at the force he gets that Hermann has to grab his elbow to stop him falling over.

He lets go as quickly as he can, turning away as he nods to himself, satisfied at the outcome, to check on Newton—

To see his shoulders *sag*.

He looks at the floor, taking a big, thankful breath. A touch *disappointed*, too, perhaps. Only he would – *could* - feel that way. There constantly seem to be so many things happening, in Newton's being, all of them at once and most of them so contradictory that it still gives Hermann a headache.

He pinches the bridge of his nose, trying not to think about whiplash, then stares pointedly at Newton until he catches the look. Fidgeting, once, he gives Hermann an awkward smile, stretches his arms widely, his tattoos flexing, cracks his fingers, then makes a fist of triumph over his head.

“*Ypa*,” he says, in Russian, low and throaty.

Hermann does not know exactly how to respond; he flexes his knee carefully, instead, under the table, and wishes he could rub it.

“More bits of fun for *me*,” Newton adds, meaning the splattered bits of kaiju that will be rounded up and sent their way. He *is* saddened, though, at the destruction. He wants one *alive*. This much is clear to anyone with half a brain; to Hermann, he might as well be pouting in a corner and kicking the walls.

He is *insane*.

“Delightful,” Hermann intones.

Newton almost laughs, and hands him his cane before he gets up.

[2019]

Tuesday lunch, Newt calls up Hanna for a catch up whilst he’s eating in the lab kitchen – never been a big fan of eating alone - and nearly inhales his banana when she answers straightaway.

So she’s not in bed yet, then, but she *is* in the pair of kaiju and Jaeger pyjama pants he got her for Christmas, and she looks so pleased to see him that he unexpectedly gets a lump in his throat.

He glances over his shoulder, in case he does, as he’d rather no-one walked in on him having a sob-fest. At least everyone else is working, and Hermann is so distracted today it took Newt four tries to get his attention, earlier. Fair enough; he’d exactly, finally, pinpointed the Breach location only a few weeks before, and everyone - repeat, *everyone* - was still reeling from that mixture of relief and pride and a new kind of fear, mutated in an exciting new direction of growth.

Multi-layers of that organically familiar feeling of *Now we know, we wish we didn’t*.

Earlier, he’d had to stride over and clap his hands next to Hermann’s ear, in order to snap him out of whatever he was thinking, or picturing, or *destroying* in his mind, and it had startled Hermann so much he’d skittered backwards. Newt had felt guilty. And amused. *What?* It wasn’t *his* fault Hermann was so distracted. This time, at least.

“Newt, I was just thinking about you!” Hanna says, and leans in to kiss the camera, all close and blurry.

“Lush. But you might want to clean that,” he tells her, when she’s moved away but he actually

can't really see her anymore. He points, with his banana. "You're misty like an '80s music video."

Hanna laughs, wiping the lense clean with her thumb. "Gut?" she asks, when colour and vision come jumping back.

"Yah."

"I have to say danke, again, by the way!" She lifts one of her short, colourful legs up into view and waves it, kicking her knee in the air so that the kaiju (Trespasser, Karloff, Onibaba) and Jaeger (Brawler Yukon, Romeo Blue, Tacit Ronin, and heh, Chernobyl) dance. "These are *knorke*." She points at the screen. "You are the best, but most predictable gift buyer ever."

He shrugs. "It's my thing."

She smiles at him, then points behind her. "So. Check out *this*." She leans, then, sideways, out of shot, so that he can see her new apartment behind her.

It's...basically a cupboard.

"I can hear every word that my neighbour says," she whispers, leaning back in, her blue eyes wide. "He's around 50 years, and does readings of Shakespeare at night. I think that he is an *actor*."

Most people would be annoyed by this, but not Hanna. She'll probably fall in love with him, or stalk him until she knows for sure. Or adopt him like a stray cat. Newt raises his eyebrows, chewing. Distraction time.

"Uh," he swallows, "quick reminder of *my* room proportions, cousin?"

"You *like* your room!"

True. "True. But! At least yours isn't every shade of green except the *nice* ones?"

Hanna tilts her head this way and that, considering. "Yah, okay." She's changed her hair, he suddenly realises, as she does it; a little slow on the uptake maybe but she has it up in a messy ponytail, and he still picked up on it a lot quicker than most guys he knows. It's the same bright red as always but cut with sharp, uneven tips that she's bleached to white. It's *cool*. Newt likes it. "But at least you have a *job*." She pouts at the screen.

Ready for bed, with her usual dark lipstick and winged eyeliner wiped clean, she just looks 14 to him, still - so baby-faced (*hereditary genetics*) that it confuses his heart. He wants her to kick ass like he knows she can, *and* he wants to fly over there and hug her for days.

"...No more luck?" he asks, throwing his banana peel across the room into the bin— *score*.

"Nein, kein, *nichts*."

So, looking for work in a mid-kaiju world with a brand new Honours degree in Composition is continuing to fail to get her anywhere? Unsurprising, but shit. Newt knows she could *definitely* find work in Berlin, with her talent and all the contacts she has from school and through Gunter, but she stubbornly wants to stay in NY, and part of him, the part that is *old* - or paternal, maybe? - wants to tell her to move home to Berlin and be sensible.

He does not *listen* to this part, though.

"You'll do it." He nods, fervently, opening his Red Bull with a *szzs*. "You will."

“I’m considering singing on the street - you know, ‘busking’?” Hanna spins a pen around and around thoughtfully, so that she has something to do with her hands, her eyes focussing on that as she thinks. “So that I can afford to eat?”

Oh, fuck *no*. “Yeahhhh, you should really not do that.”

“Hey!” She cants her gaze back to him immediately. “Du bist ein *Arsch*! I can sing.”

“No, you silly, beautiful thing, you really can’t.”

She hisses at him like *Medusa*, through her little teeth, her ponytail flicking about her head - but he can see that she’s laughing too, grimacing, and trying to hide it by ducking her chin. This is an old topic, as is her continued frustration that she can make music and note melody as well as him, yet cannot hold a steady tune for the life of her. *Sometimes* she’s bang on! But mostly she...wanders a little.

“Oh mein Gott,” she sighs, and giggles, scrunching up her face in rage. “You *suck* so much.”

Newt just wants to boop her freckled nose. “Okay,” he laughs, “tiny *American* girl?”

“Shut up.” She giggles again, then slumps, kicks her bare foot against the leg of her desk for a while; Newt hears the thump travelling up and echoing through her laptop, sees the cymatics in the tiny shifts of camera angle. “It is *so unfair*. You can all sing. I get music, I can make music, just... without my voice.”

He shrugs. “We can’t all be vocally perfect.” When she glares at him, he grins widely, takes a mouthful of his sweet drink. Yeah, he can sing, no big deal - except for how it completely *is* because he is fucking *amazing* and his talent has got him into some great, *great* situations.

Also, some that were not so brilliant. The percentages are mostly in his favour, though.

He grins some more, then gets serious. “But - and you know none of us have had the heart to tell Gunter this so don’t either - but you should really be *accepting* now that New York post-graduation is *nicht gut* for anyone who wishes to buy actual food.”

Hanna moodily flicks the pen back and forward through her fingers like a sound visualisation and grunts, non-committally.

“I did warn you about this...”

“Yah, I *know*.” She waggles the pen at him in frustration, then sighs and throws it behind her onto her bed, and looks at the screen, face on, chin in her hands. “It’s okay. At least your parents feed me so much each time I hop a train over to them, I cannot walk home.”

They’re cooking as much as normal, then, even though he’s been moved out for years. Some things don’t change. It still seems so *crazy* to Newt that most of the world carries on as if nothing is different, sometimes; not as if they have no idea, but either as though they don’t care, or it doesn’t *matter* as much as everything else. The little things, the everyday shit. School, dinner, changing your sheets. Pets. Hang-nails. Surgings, inane little bits of *life*. That’s important, he knows.

Yet, he can’t imagine it.

Can’t imagine not being *here*.

Behind him, in the lab, there’s a bang and the sound of Hermann barking something loud, *piercing*,

perfectly timed as if to prove it to him. Newt glances behind himself again, to listen, though he can't pick out any words, just the general gist of pissiness. He chuckles to himself, then turns back and nods at Hanna, sagely.

"So you eat so much you end up waddling like Truman, after?" he asks, demonstrating.

"Your Papa has such a thing for American *bacon*," Hanna agrees, clearly still amazed by it. His dad's capacity for eating is pretty impressive, he has to admit.

Newt laughs.

"But wait!" she adds, before he can say anything else, leaning in close. "Who is shouting?"

"Oh, that's Hermann." He waves a hand. "The other German one."

She pauses. "...Und?"

"*Und* nothing." He drinks again. "Seriously."

"Hmn." She eyeballs him for a minute, and he eyeballs her right back, carefully; don't give anything away, keep it cool, keep eye contact. He can keep eye contact like a *boss*. There's nothing to tell, anyway. This is why he's okay with skyping her out of his room, now. Time, wisdom, etc etc.

Hanna breaks first. "Ohh fine." She tucks a stray bit of hair behind her ear. "I have more important news, anyway!"

"Of course you do."

She swears at him, grinning, then goes on, excitedly, to explain about this *guy* she'd met a couple of days before at a party, who of course had the biggest brown eyes she's ever seen, and bought her a coffee the next day - which had been very reassuring since she'd found her first grey when she re-did her hair and was feeling a bit fragile.

Newt snorts into the dregs of his drink. "Hanna. You are 22. I don't think you need to be worrying about grey hair." He touches his jaw, buzzing his fingers against the grain of stubble. "I've got at least *six* in my beard here, somewhere."

"But Mutti got these young, too," she replies, a mixture of annoyed and, obviously, when you're him and you *know* her, pleased.

Oh. He tilts his head, gently, considering her. "You remember?" He lets his voice pitch softer and Hanna half-smiles, looking down slightly, off-screen.

"Kann *sein*?"

Tante Liesa died when Newt was 12, and Hanna 5. He remembers holding Hanna's hand at the funeral, and how tiny she was, and how Gunter held her other hand and had abruptly developed this new habit of stroking his beard and moustache repetitively, reflexively, all through the speeches and the wake. As if that helped him.

"Yeah." Newt nods. "Yeah, she did, kiddo." Before she'd lost all her hair. Fucking *shit*. "She dyed them out, of course, but I always thought it was pretty." His memories are all of her laughing, when he came for summers to visit, picking him up to stand on a chair and let him taste every single thing of what she was cooking - she was a real foodie, taking advantage of when it became

possible to be a foodie, in newly unified Berlin - even the stuff that made his eyes cross, and of her reading to him, and of her hugely pregnant and throwing a cushion at Gunter. He's very grateful for this.

Hanna grins at him, soft, and puts her chin on her hand, smiling to herself. "Yah. Papa says that, too."

When they hang up Newt wanders back into the lab, feeling good. Strangely calm, again. A little more awake, more focussed. Always good to remember what you're working for. So that his cousin gets to just live her normal, stupid, lovely life, without being trampled by an incredible but unfortunately homicidal kaiju.

As he strolls past Hermann's area, Hermann clears his throat. "Newton?"

He spins, on the balls of his feet. "Yup?"

Hermann looks— not great, exactly; a little more disorderly than normal with his crumpled shirt collar sticking out above his sweater, his hair in an awkward side parting that looks weirdly good. But he's always going to look weirdly good, to Newt. That's life, basically. Stupid. Brilliant. Worth fighting for.

"Might I have a moment of your time?"

"I can give you *three* moments," he says, crossing over. "Sup?"

Hermann makes a pinched face at that, but rolls his chair left a little, to make room. Newt hops up onto his desk instead, because it pisses him off, and grins when Hermann has to take a tiny *pause*, of horror, before he can speak.

"I would appreciate your...unique point of view on this algorithm."

He plays it cool, again, just nods, but inside he's pleased. This is their new thing - working *together*. Newt had helped him with locating the Breach. This had mostly involved shouting and pushing him to explain what the *fuck* he was muttering about, over there, and bringing him endless caffeine, and *not* touching the numbers and crumbly, colourful chalk on the blackboards like he had wanted to, whenever Hermann explained anything to him, or when he came over to see - but it had seemed to spur Hermann on, enough.

He's decided they're like nuclear fusion: bright and incredible, sometimes destructive, two things combining together to make something new, and probably they will ultimately kill each other but powering *something*, making, creating, just surging *on*... Now that they've found the Breach, it's onto the next thing, so he'd felt totally fucking justified in slapping two goo-covered, gloved handprints right in the middle of Hermann's equations yesterday, really just *wiping them about* all over, because Hermann had called him 'little nuisance' and it was that or fucking kick him in his pretentious, pouty *face* - but then the day before *that* he'd worked up his own model of Blue volume vs kaiju mass, based on his own dissection results underpinned by the beginnings of Hermann's loose predictive outline, trying to get a feel for what fun attributes might be coming in the kaiju next. For how to plot them.

And it was *beautiful*.

They're *working*.

"You do know," he says, folding his arms as he shuffles about on the desk, getting comfortable, "that no matter how careful you are in your wording, I *hear* the implied insult, dude."

"I would expect nothing less from someone with your intellect," Hermann says, dour, as he turns his screen toward Newt.

"See, there you go again." He puts one boot on the edge of Hermann's chair, puts it back straightaway when Hermann knocks it off with his elbow, drums the other ankle back against the drawers with a grin when Hermann tutts and *looks* at him over the top of his glasses. Honey eyes and long fingers.

"*Do* shut up before you embarrass yourself further, and look at this." Hermann points.

Newt follows the graceful line of his wrist to his fingers, and further, falls into his numbers with a grin.

Hermann gets an email on a bleary Monday afternoon, informing him that he is being moved to the Sydney Shatterdome, to put him in a fresh location from which to focus on destruction of the Breach.

He reads the missive three times, then glances up from his screen and looks across the lab at Newton, who is the only one in that day.

Anya has gone, Agnieszka has put in a request to transfer back to Lima, and Harold seems to be dangerously close to over-worked exhaustion, a thing that had led Newton to quietly lean over his shoulder and suggest, in a pitched-low voice, that he take some leave and get out of the city for a bit, the day before.

Hermann had been able to overhear from his own part of the lab, glancing carefully across. Though not so obviously as to distress Harold further, *or* to make it seem that he was *interested*, though he was; Newton's hand on Harold's shoulder, seeming pale against Harold's bent, dark, head, his fingers interlaced over the back of his own neck and his shuddery nod.

Today, Newt is quietly scribbling codex on a whiteboard with a pair of Anya's 'lost' headphones on, nodding along to whatever he is listening to. His hand - both, as on occasion he switches the pen, and yes it has been endlessly frustrating to Hermann that he is willingly *ambidextrous*, as well as everything else, since he first noted it - flies across the board at a completely different tempo to the rest of him.

Hermann considers him, taking the opportunity to do whilst he is distracted. His boots tapping on the floor, with their blue laces, the tattoos disappearing up the backs of both arms, now, and underneath his shirt sleeves - the fresh one on his left bicep still covered in translucent gauze that makes the pit of Hermann's stomach feel strange. The mess surrounding him, the literal path of destruction he's wrought that day, the section of kaiju flesh on the work surface behind him that he'd peeled down to four distinct layers that morning and categorised, minutely, incredibly.

He taps the end of the marker pen against the back of his other hand whenever he steps back to look at the board and think. Fixed green gaze behind his glasses, taking in the symbols and notes that he's added. He always adjusts his glasses before he moves in again.

Hermann looks back down and responds to the email, as briefly as he dares.

>>PPDCHead<<

RE: SYDNEY

No. Thank you.

That will not suit.

- H.Gottlieb, PhD

Not even the end of May and they've just agreed for a *second time* to go and get some dinner after work, outside of the 'dome, instead of just crawling back to their respective rooms.

This is exciting, right? Hermann's actually agreeing to spend time with him. Newt has been on his *best* fucking behaviour and it's paying off. This is *progress*.

Also, there's another perk – Newt's discovered that if you get him in the right mood, Hermann will give hilariously snarky commentary about the choice of food on the menus, or the décor, or the service, in the shitty places Newt picks for them, and this might be his new favourite thing in the *world*. Minus the kaiju. Or, sort of, they don't count. Uh. Minus *Khamisi*.

He checks his emails on Kong when they're on the subway, whilst also trying to decide what terrible place they should find tonight - close but not so close that it still feels like being in the 'dome, cheap but not food-poisoning bad...

He's sitting next to Hermann, all crammed in against him as what feels like 300,000 people pour out of the doors at one stop, having given up the seat by the wall so Hermann only has to have *actual human contact* on one side, instead of both, and slumped down in his seat next to him with his legs kicked out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. Really fucking annoying for everyone else, sure, but it boxes Hermann's dodgy knee in and stops anyone else tripping into him, like last time they actually went somewhere at the same time, with the same aim.

Hermann's *hiss* as a man stumbled into his leg had got Newt right in the *gut*. You know? So everyone else can just be pissed off at him.

He's tough, he can take it.

He hums under his breath as he reads, though it isn't really audible over the smooth noise of the train in the background, his chin on his chest and Kong propped on his tummy, the side of his wrists pressing pleasantly against his hipbones. Hermann's got his hands crossed delicately over the handle of his cane, in Newt's periphery, his eyes closed in exhaustion. His lashes are so dark.

The train judders and rights itself again.

Newt reads, deletes, and snorts to himself at a conversation made of subject lines from a few weeks ago that he'd forgotten about - when they'd been too angry with each other to actually deign using *words* acceptable:

- > TURN THAT RACKET DOWN YOU INGRATE
- >re bitc3ng: you wolnt know good mucsic if it bit you, dude, Im educatng you

- > RE: whining: I HARDLY THINK SIRIUSMO CLASSES AS 'GOOD'
- > re WHAAAT holy sh\$it YU KNOW HIM?!
- > RE: FOR G*D'S SAKE THAT IS NOT IMPORTANT

He reminds himself to ask Hermann— Then stops, abruptly, seeing a new, red-flashing email from the PPDC. He opens it.

He's being moved to Sydney.

Immediately he glances to his left but Hermann's still got his eyes closed, though he angles his tablet slightly to the right anyway, just in case. Then he thinks about it for a second, looking up and across the train at the poster above the family, sitting on the seats opposite and chattering away to each other, but not really looking at *that*, or listening, just...*looking*. Thinking.

Then he shoots off a response.

>>PPDCHead<<

RE: SYDNEY

Hey,

thankas but Im gonna say no to this one.

- Better off fhere.

Thanks,

- N.G

Hermann elbows him, lightly, just as he hits send, making him jerk upright and flail Kong around, a little.

"Unless you're planning on embarking elsewhere," Hermann says, his glasses back on already, "this is our stop."

"Sweet." Newt tucks his tablet into his bag, swings himself up by the pole next to him - and possibly a little bit around it, showy, fun - in the space, and waits half a second for Hermann to catch up before hopping out of the door.

Hermann receives another official mail, a few weeks later.

Yourself and Dr. Geiszler will be moved to the Sydney Branch, along with some key members of other staff, with immediate effect.

When he glances up, Newton is already looking at him across the lab. They both flinch, surprised; Hermann knocks his ankle against his desk as he does.

Newton chuckles, openly un-self-conscious, and stands up so that he can peer over the equipment more easily.

"You, uh..." He rubs the back of his neck. "You just get an email?" he calls, across the space.

"Yes." Hermann stands as well, leaning against the back of his chair, and then puts his other hand in his pocket, unsure what to do with it, splits his weight equally onto both legs, as he's teaching himself. "It, ah. It would appear we're off to the Antipodes."

Newton rolls his eyes. "You can use the actual name of the *country*, dude. You don't have to up the latent Britishness in response to moving there *just* yet."

"Ah, of course," he replies, rolling his own eyes. "I simply *must* remember to over-simplify for you, how *could* I have forgotten."

"You are a *dick*," Newton counters. He could have said much worse. Hermann purses his lips so that he won't smile.

"I am *not* sitting next to you on the flight."

He does, of course.

Newton, full of excited energy, crashes after they eat and falls asleep on him after barely an hour, head tipping and dropping onto Hermann's shoulder. He makes to move away, but then finds he cannot; with the window next to him there is not really anywhere else for him to *go*. He shrugs his shoulder, carefully, not exactly wanting to hurt Newton, just to dislodge him, but it does not work. He glances down, frowning. And stops.

Newton's glasses are pressed into his forehead, fighting against the way his eyebrows are slightly drifting down, his face frowning a little, and very open. Young. His lashes are darker than his freckles, his mouth is closed (for once), soft and very pink, and he sleeps like the dead - and, Hermann knows, he sleeps *rarely*.

He cannot bring himself to wake him.

He attempts to read, instead. Newton *snuffs* and noses at his throat, reflexively, in his sleep, making him swallow very carefully. Perhaps if he inch a little more to the left, just enough to put his elbow up on the windowsill - this will all be terribly embarrassing for Newton, when he wakes up and Hermann tells him.

...Actually. When Hermann *uses it against him*?

In that case, fine. Carry on.

Newton, helpfully, balances out any warm, awkward feelings that Hermann gets, any flush to his cheeks, by also dribbling on his collar before he finally rolls away in his sleep to face in the rest of the plane.

Wonderful.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[2019, contd]

Sydney is exactly what Hermann expects it to be; bright, loud, hazy-edged and full of incongruous curves in the architecture and coastline. The first sunset after they land and approach the Shatterdome by car is all primary colours - red sky, yellow sand, dark blue sea, so different from the stony English coast he saw, and so much bigger and wider than the Welsh. The sky is so huge he wants to watch birds fly through it, imagines the contrails criss-crossing and makes a note to walk and see it in the day.

It's a beautiful place.

He hates it.

They settle in quickly – Harold has come with them, though he arrives on a later flight, but no-one else that they recognise, so there are new faces to meet everywhere. He doesn't know about Newton but he's beginning to find all these introductions *tiresome*.

He does see one familiar face, at least: he pre-booked his first medical check-up for the day after they arrive, a Saturday, in order to get a pass for the gym again. Doctor Itami jumps up when he peers cautiously through the doorway, and waves him in with a knowing look.

Hermann is *highly* relieved not to have to explain his backstory or situation again. He gets what he needs and makes to leave.

"Less than 4 minutes in my room, this time," Doctor Itami calls after him, as he's heading for the door. He turns, using his cane, to see the doctor good-naturedly checking his watch and smiling wryly at him. "This might be an efficiency record for you."

"I aim for nothing less," he says, after a moment, as polite as he can muster, and leaves.

They have been assigned rooms in the Shatterdome, again, which is built and operates on a similar layout to Tokyo, and Lima. They were all designed at similar times, after all – meaning, in a *rush*. His room is essentially identical to Tokyo, though he measures it doubtfully on the second evening and has his suspicions confirmed; it is 1.3 inches *smaller*.

He can put up with it, for now, but given that this is the third country in as many years he genuinely would very much have liked to *stay* here for a time, perhaps to settle in, somewhat, as living out of one box of personal items and fourteen for work is becoming claustrophobic.

Not anymore, though. He'll be continuing to live in somewhat of a limbo, then.

Fine.

There are a number of incredible Jaeger models, here, including one Mark III, Vulcan Specter, and another nearing completion. Their new lab is different, at least. Their room is very large, designed with distinct workspaces for six, so each worker essentially has their own little bubble of space. No more knocking elbows or getting distracted by Newton bouncing along to his music.

There are, however, *seven* names listed for the room, instead of six.

He and Newton aren't due to start work until the Monday, but late on Sunday morning Hermann shrugs on an old grey jumper he'd forgotten he even owned, until it came to packing and unpacking again, and pops over to take a look. He simply wants to ensure that his things have been moved in correctly.

They most definitely have *not*.

Newton wanders in a few minutes later, yawning widely, hair rumpled as if he's just woken up. He raises his eyebrows at Hermann when he spots him.

"Hey, what's—"

"*Look*," he hisses.

They both survey the space that has been designated for them. It would appear that they are crammed together on the left hand side, boxes and items stacked haphazardly, underneath three long strip lights that are nonetheless not *enough* for the work they need to do together.

They both assess it. Well. Hermann glances sideways to check; he saw Newton come early to check the lab like this when they moved to Tokyo, but always harboured a small suspicion that he came only to note all the places he could fill with useless detritus.

Instead, Newton *does* look dismayed. He turns to Hermann with a frown. "Shit." Then he sighs, and spreads his arms wide, smiling bemusedly. "Sunday tidy party?"

Before Hermann can reply, he chuckles, and strides over to start organising, scratching his stomach underneath his crumpled t-shirt as he goes. Hermann rolls his eyes, doesn't check the revealed flash of Newton's lower back for ink, and follows, hooking his cane on a filing cabinet.

He stands in the middle, for a moment, puts his hands on his hips as he looks around, then sighs.

"Yep," Newton agrees, throwing him a grin.

The collection of desks that they have been assigned are a muddled mess. Their things have been placed with no order or apparent care for the instructions Hermann left on each of his. Newton wheels over a kaiju organ (Hermann is not sure *what*) in a tank with chemically yellow water that throws an unpleasant reflection over Hermann's best digital HD screener, until he moves it, eventually, after Hermann has shouted at him for 13.6 minutes to do so. There isn't enough room for all of his own blackboards, meaning that he has to *layer* them.

The cables, with all of their machines and technology and folders and boxes in, sprawl everywhere in tangled messes, as if designed perfectly to trip them up. Hermann does so, twice, kicking one set of cables aside savagely after he nearly spills his second cup of tea all over himself.

A few minutes later the same group trips up *Newton*, who comes back cradling a box of folders to his chest *and* trying to read the one on top, glasses partway down his nose, a data-card held in his teeth.

He hop-skips sideways, with the momentum, trying not to fall on his face, *hnffs* as he almost falls into Hermann and twists at the last moment so that he cracks a hip against the sharp, metallic edge of his desk, instead.

He makes a high noise, in the back of his throat, teeth still clamped shut, then wobbles, twists,

rights himself, and tries to hold onto his armful as he slumps against the desk. Behind his glasses, his eyes water as he makes a pained face over the top of the data-card, at Hermann.

“Good grief.” Hermann leans across to carefully, a little awkwardly, take the card out of Newton’s mouth before he *bites* through it. It’s likely to be important. “Are you injured?” he asks, as Newton takes longer than one might have expected to unclench his teeth, then sag back.

“Motherfuck—” Newton groans, turns to dump all of the papers on the desk, and rubs at his hip with the heel of his hand. He’s giggling to himself as well, though, hissing and chuckling alternately. He cannot be too seriously injured, then.

“Welcome to Sydney, they say,” he mutters. “My *ass*, I tell them—” He puts both hands on the desk, hunches over with a long, slow exhale, then looks at Hermann sideways as Hermann delicately puts the card down, managing *not* to touch any of the damp parts.

“This lab is trying to kill us. Did you piss someone at the top off *already*?”

Hermann scowls. Perhaps, by turning this down once, but he need not share that. “No, but I do agree with you.”

“Really? Oh, frabjous day.”

Hermann spends the rest of that first afternoon tidying the cables up out of sheer frustration and the deep, undeniable portent of doom that they can both feel, and therefore averts the inevitable and probable serious accident. He starts at his desk to begin with, then, unhappily, sitting on the floor, before tutting and pushing his desk chair into the middle of the space, dragging the cables with him, and sitting in it with them across his thighs.

He knots, twisting and zipping them together into neat lines. It’s like a puzzle to solve. A rubik’s cube. Easy.

Time passes. Newton, gleeful at the discovery that the researcher before him had colour-coded his Blue samples into a slowly darkening paint palette, only half-watches him do it whilst flipping through them. He even manages to refrain from commentary for a whole 14 minutes. With his mouth, at least. His eyes, very large, and his constant glances across at Hermann’s hands, say enough.

Finally, he breaks.

“If I ever have a knot in my shoelaces, remind me to ask you,” he says, nodding towards Hermann’s fingers, currently cable-tying a HDMI and a DVI together.

“Surely you know how to tie them by *now*?” he asks, running fingertips along the cable to ensure it is flat, then twisting his wrist to hold it up to his eyes, in order to ensure.

Newton makes a choked *sound*, and snaps, “I’m good with nooses, too. Hangman’s, you know.” Hermann snorts, and he continues, smoothly. “I was a Scout.”

He does glance over, at that. “...What a terrifying thought.”

6 minutes *later*, Newton finally gives a frustrated huff and puts down his papers. “Don’t, you—” He gets up, crossing over to Hermann and pointing. “You could use a cable splitter for that, it’d be much easier.”

“Yes, Newton, but unless you have one of those lying around, I cannot.” He looks up, lips pinched.

Then tenses. Oh, *no*.

Newton gets that *expression*. Mouth going soft, gaze drifting up and to the right, in thought. “Wait a sec...” He spins, immediately, then nips over towards another section of the lab and starts moving things – not *his own* things – around.

“Is this really necessary?” Hermann asks, loudly, trying to protest, but Newton ignores him.

He rifles through drawers and cupboards until he finds tools, some plastic, a roll of tape he shoves onto his wrist like a bracelet, and an enormous pair of pliers, then drags them and his own chair over. He sits opposite Hermann with a flourish, knees spread, one boot bouncing in concentration, and reaches out. “Gimme.”

Hermann narrows his eyes, but does, in the spirit of insanity and experimentation. He stretches down to pick up the final batch of wires from the floor by his feet, and start upon them instead.

When he next looks up, Newton has already created something complex and, likely, dangerous, with six colourful cables neatly spread from a central divide. He rips a piece of tape from the roll with his teeth, then seals it together with deft strokes by the pad of his thumbs.

“Soldering iron would be better but, you know.” He shrugs, hands it back to Hermann, who takes it, hesitantly. He tests it between two fingers; it feels fairly sturdy. “See?” Newton asks, quiet.

“Unfortunately?” He lifts an eyebrow at Newton, wry. “Yes.”

Newton grins at him and goes back to his own desk.

With all of the cables neatly tied away, Hermann then spends half an hour winding and nudging them *behind* the desks, wherever possible. He does fine until he reaches the corner, when he gets stuck with a small space behind a plug socket and a too-large wad of cables. He considers it for a moment, running through the geometry of the space and how to make it fit. His knee will possibly not co-operate with his scheme, but if he take the radial space of the gap and consider—

Then he decides, bugger *this* for a lark. He is tired, it is nearly 5pm, and he would like some supper, not to be *here*, fiddling with cables that some idiot couldn’t put away.

He works – perhaps he shunts, a *little* - his way in between the desk and the wall, twists, and then shoves the cable behind the back of the furniture, all the way down until his shoulder gets stuck. He can still see it, though, when he straightens, so he huffs in frustration, stretches for his cane, and uses the end to jam it in further, aggressively. He also kicks the desk, for good measure.

When he wiggles out again, he is pleased. Until he spots Newton, staring at him.

He lifts his chin, defiantly. “You have something to add?”

“Only that you called *me* heavy handed, once...” Newton laughs at him. *At him*.

“You have dirt on your face,” he points out, but Newton just laughs more.

“So do you, dude.” He giggles, wiping his arms, smudging the oily grease he also has on his forearms around his wrists, smudging black over the colours, and how he has managed to get that there Hermann does not *know*, and points a dirty fingertip at Hermann. His grin is bright, and annoying. “So do you.”

After a few weeks in Sydney, Newt cracks, and brings in a lamp he finds in a second hand shop down by the seafront - or, what used to be the seafront - on a scouting trip with Harold. He'd managed to convince Harold that *he* had to buy the hand-painted copy of the Mona Lisa that was so bad he and Newt had cried with muffled laughter, which they really did *try* to smother, in the shop, before going to get ice-cream, with her jammed in Harold's backpack.

It's nice to have something that's *not* connected to the 'base. The new space they have is so bare, even if it *is* too full of his and Hermann's stuff. Newt needs...a personal touch, and not just pics of family, or friends, and this includes the photo from Lima, which he took off the pinboard and stuck in his jeans pocket, and brought along himself. He even treated with chemicals, just before he packed it, so that it wouldn't fade any more. But he needs... *Something*.

All this moving around is starting to *suck*.

The lamp possibly the ugliest thing he's ever seen. It's fantastic. So is the face Hermann pulls when he inflicts it upon their shared space.

Hermann counters the next week by bringing in a cactus, plonking it down on Newt's desk and striding on past.

"A gift?" he ask, confused.

"I felt it was high time for the introduction of a *useful* life form to your general side of the space."

Unfortunately for him, cacti are *sick* and Newt did a study on them once in college, so he launches into a well referenced and researched spiel about natural defence and crassulacean acid metabolism and transpiration, and then he thinks about *bonsai* and cultivation and patience, and the existing place in Japanese culture, that mixture of ancient tradition and modernity, *so* fascinating - but cacti, seriously, they look so alien but they're actually more anciently suited to the terrain, weirdly prehistoric, and if the kaiju are coming from another world then what on earth - ha, no, what in the world - nope, what the *fuck* might they have there, realistically, and he is *thirsty*, actually, they're going to need a fridge in this lab...

At which point Hermann has turned away and mentally tuned him out, but Harold's still nodding along, so.

The rest of the team keep to themselves. Newt's learned names, of course, but he's getting a bit tired of all the *remembering*, and one - Jerome - tells him that they really have a quick turnover there, so. No offense.

In fact, a few days after they arrive, the Programmer (Sarah) they have barely been introduced to leaves, and there is still a vacant space across the lab for the next few months. Newt *would* point out this is stupid, since he or Hermann could cover that, but he's busy copying and sequencing and testing metabolism theories and Hermann's trying to map and image the data coming in on the Breach, so. Nope.

It's almost the end of May before they're informed that the space will be filled. Newt gets up weirdly early the next day, decides to go out for coffee instead of sticking with the crap they can get free in the 'dome, and maybe pick up a few for the rest of the team - he is a generous soul after all, and nothing like making a good impression.

He wonders, as he walks along with his hands in his pockets, stepping around the trash collectors

and the people stumbling home from the night before – he salutes one guy who is still clasping a beer optimistically, because rock on, dude - what exactly Hermann's first impression of him was. That would be interesting to know. Or...depressing. He's unsure. But there goes his morbid curiosity, raising its head again. Perhaps, he thinks, as he glances over his shoulder and turns onto —

There's a shriek and a squeal and he flinches and the cyclist jerks her bike to the right, but she still *just* clips his side - metallic, solid, angled impact under his arm, making him scuff into the side of the building with his face. Slipping, he lands awkwardly on his knees, skinning his palms, his glasses falling off. His jaw clacks shut as he lands and he bites through his bottom lip. Just to make things *worse*, you know, just to *add* to the *awesomeness* of what just happened, *fuck*—

He pushes himself back onto his haunches and turns his head, dazed, to look as the woman wobbles, skids to a halt and jumps off her bike.

“Jaysus *fuck*, oh my—” She's Australian, and *shouting*, is that really fair, he gapes at her as she runs over to him, dropping to her knees as well. “Are you okay, you bloody *idiot*, don't you look, Christ – are you dying?!”

His mouth is filling with blood, yeah, but he has to chuckle. “Nope, don't...*think* so.” He licks his throbbing lip, then shuffles back to sit on his ass against the wall. His head is spinning a bit, so he sits for a second and lets it right itself, whilst she eyes him worriedly.

She looks like a serious cyclist, all helmet and dark gear, hair in a neat ponytail, lycra, the *works*, but her eyes are huge and she's gone very pale even though he suspects she's normally pretty tanned, with two spots of colour on her cheeks. He lifts his shaky hands to pat himself down. Everything in one piece, though his left shoulder is throbbing and his side is *screaming* at him.

“Are you sure?” She undoes her helmet, throws it off, then leans over and puts his glasses back on his nose with equally shaky fingers, then stares in his eyes. “Unless you're a doctor I doubt you're qualified to say that and I really don't want to have killed you, even though you're the one who stepped out—”

“I am a doctor, actually,” he interrupts, because wow too many words right now. The back of his neck's starting to go clammy and cold, his face sweating. Goodbye fight or flight instinct, we had a good run, he thinks, as he starts to feel a little sick.

“Oh.” She squeezes her own face in her gloved hands for a second, in thought. “Is that worse?”

“No, I'm—” He swallows the taste of copper-spit and tries to make himself stop tonguing his throbbing lip. “Biologist, mostly. Not entirely medical, but enough to know I'm okay. Really.”

“I hope so.” She stares at him for a few more seconds, her breath coming fast. His own has, thankfully, started to slow. “I'm Jessie,” she says, suddenly. “Do you...I dunno, do know your name, the date?”

He snorts to himself, then gingerly fans a hand over what is possibly a cracked rib afterwards because *ow fuck* that hurts. “Yep, Jessie, I know my name, which is Newt Geiszler, and it's May 20th.” He reaches out with his free hand to shake hers, awkwardly. “And you really *suck*, by the way.”

She looks uncomfortable, letting go of his fingers. “Oi, don't try and blame me, would it kill you to *look*?”

“I fucking *did!*” he screeches, possibly louder than he ought to because she flinches, and then things spin a bit more and he has to slump against the wall. “Oooh, god. Bad move.”

She pulls a face. “Right, time for an actual doctor.”

She gets an arm under his elbow and helps him up onto wobbly feet. She’s the same height as him, which is nice, and he’s cool with getting back to the ‘dome and laying on a gurney for a bit so that he doesn’t chuck up in the street, yep.

“I work in the Shatterdome,” he tells her, when she’s helped him lean against the wall and darts over to her bike. “We have a team there. It’s just up the road, so I’m good to just...get there.”

She crosses back carrying a bottle of water which she gives him. He drinks, gratefully, whilst she watches him. “Works for me,” she answers. “I start there today.” He pauses, bottle at his lips, and she gives him another awkward grin.

“New programmer?”

He swallows. “Well that’s... *Great.*”

“Your fault,” she says again.

She wheels her bike with him to the ‘dome, letting him hold the saddle to help with the limp - her pedal clipped his shin and it’s possibly bleeding into his boots, but whatever. They only take 10 minutes to get there; he uses his pass to get them in and waits, politely, whilst she wheels her bike in and out of the elevator, like a fucking gentleman, which is impressive because his body is kicking into *rest rest fluids rest* drive and really he wants to sit down again, thanks.

The only person on staff at that crazy time of the morning is one doctor, who glances up from a tablet as Newt hobbles in and raises a dark eyebrow, starts moving immediately.

“Did this just happen in the corridor?” he asks, herding Newt to a bed and pulling a penlight out of his pocket to look in Newt’s eyes, because Jessie’s following him in *with her bike*, as if it is her pet.

He spreads his arms wide in bemusement, tilting his head back obediently. “Less embarrassingly, no; outside.”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Jessie pipes up. “Just because you can’t look where you’re going.”

He tries to glare at her but the doctor – Itami, by his name tag, nice face, hello – turns his chin back. “Hold still, please.”

Itami looks him over, *hmns* and then crosses to put on plastic gloves and get a tray of goodies. Newt shrugs out of his jacket carefully as he does, laying it behind him. The smell of clinics is always weirdly comforting. Reminds him of teaching. He glances over to see Jessie, still hovering by the door.

“Oh!” He grins, ruefully. “Hey, you know I’m good, really. You should go get settled in, or whatever it is you need to do. It’s not even 6am.”

She shifts her weight, an elbow on the handlebars of her bike. “Are you sure? I feel sort of responsible, in the sense of it not being my fault, but that I was there...”

He chuckles. “It’s cool. I’m fine. I’ll just get patched up and possibly even a lollipop, if I’m

good...” Itami ignores that, whilst Jessie rolls her eyes, so he shoos her. “Go on. I’ll catch you later in the lab.”

She hesitates, then nods. “Okay. Gotcha. Um... Sorry! But, still your fault.”

“I hate you.” He waves at her, she laughs, and goes.

He kicks his feet a bit, watching the doctor get all the things he can already predict and list, and that reminds him – he bends his knee to plant his boot on the bed and rolls the leg of his jeans up to look at the scrape and raised lump on his left shin. About where he broke it, if he remembers, and he knows he does. The little indentation and crackle in his tibia, right there—

“Newton Geiszler...” Doctor Itami reads his name out, holding up his file as he crosses back over.

“As charged.”

“Let’s take a look, then.”

They lift his shirt to check his side – another impressive and, if he says so himself, fucking *beautiful* bruise on his *lattissimus dorsi*, over the 6th and 7th ribs and right about where the costal groove runs underneath, sore and mottled and turning yellowy-green already, but when the doc probes it carefully with his fingers, nothing feels broken. Could be cracked, as breathing still hurts a little, but it’s nothing major. He really feels alright.

They discuss him getting an x-ray but Newt doesn’t want to waste the time – it probably won’t show up anyway, even if it is cracked, which he knows and Itami knows that he knows, having seen his file, and his history, and his specialisation areas, and his *degrees*, and he also obviously agrees even if he does make the correct doctor faces and suggest it, more than once.

“Dude, really, why waste the effort? She just *clipped* me a bit. No impaired movement, no extra-sensitivity to your touch other than that the bruise hurts like a bitch, breathing’s fine, if a bit more exciting than this morning...”

Itami tilts his head. “Okay. I’m happy if you are. Normally people *want* the x-ray,” he adds, looking at Newt with interest.

He shrugs, then wishes he hadn’t. “Well, I’m—”

“Newton? What have you done?”

They both turn as one to see Hermann coming into the medical ward, face pinched and his movements hurried. Cane, today, Newt notes. He keeps a tally. It’s a thing, he can admit it.

He pulls a face. “Oh, hey, man.” As Hermann comes towards him, curious, he rubs the back of his neck. Just. Just *great*, fucking great, he did *not* need Hermann to know.

Hermann frowns as he comes to a stop by the bed, half-glancing at Itami— “Hello, Doctor,” – “Hi, Dr. Gottlieb,” – then back at Newt, who frowns right *back* at him.

“Uh, you two—?” He flicks his finger back and forth between his doctor and lab partner. Hermann waves a hand.

“He has assisted my with my leg—” Itami nods, once, curtly, one gesture saying a *thousand things* Newt wants to explore - “—*Newton*,” Hermann continues, without pause. “What happened? Your...” His fingers lift to point at Newt’s face, then curl back tight on his cane. “Harold said you

were in here.”

Newt tilts his head. “How did *Harold* know?”

“How does Harold know *anything*—” Hermann waves his arms viciously, then hooks his cane on Newton’s bed and leans on it with a hand. “Infernal gossip that he is.” He puts the other one on his hip after a second of fluttery hesitation during which Newt almost thinks he might touch his cheek. Or, would think that, if Hermann were a normal human being. “You were hit by a bike?”

“Her fault.” He says this immediately and without hesitation. Best defence is a strong offense. Hermann huffs, and Itami laughs.

“Of *course*.” Hermann goes back to sour, rolling his Rs again. Newt smiles, shrugs – oh fuck, not *again*? He winces. Ouch.

Doctor Itami cleans his face and shin up with stingy antiseptic and crisp white pads and the smell of plastic gloves, close to Newt’s nose, that reminds him of college, and Uni, and hours spent working on dissection and memorisation and distillation - of working so late and long and determinedly that all the rest of his peers started moving away from him into their own space, left him alone; of all his work on tissue regeneration and teaching. When he tapes a small pad over the scrape on his shin, the pull on the hairs on his leg brings Newt back to now.

“I cannot do much about your lip,” Itami is saying to him, apologetically. “Though you ought to stop playing with it.”

Newt jolts, guiltily, bottom lip still sucked into between his teeth. Hermann, who has by now given up on standing and brought a chair over to sit in, next to Newton’s dangling feet, with his arms folded, legs crossed, snorts at him.

“Idiot.”

Doctor Itami glances at Hermann, eyes bright and amused, then back at Newt. “So. I’ll assign you some painkillers, and you’re fine to go.”

Oh. He stills. “Oh, no man, that’s cool. I don’t need any.”

The doc pauses, hands already starting to send the order through his tablet. He looks up at Newt. “...None?” he asks, carefully.

Newt shakes his head. “I’m fine. I don’t...” He can *feel* Hermann looking at him, yeah. “I don’t really take medication, if I don’t need it, and I really don’t. So.” He gives a thumbs-up, then puts his hand back down on the bed next to him, putting his weight back on his grazed palms.

Itami says, *Hmn*, but crosses over to the main terminal in the room to make a note on his file.

Newt breathes, then turns his head to Hermann. “Yep?”

Hermann re-arranges his hands in his lap. “Pardon?”

“Say what you want to say, Hermann. I can *hear* you thinking from here.”

Hermann purses his lips, but then leans forward towards him. “Newton, I...” The leather of his seat squeaks, as he shifts. “I don’t see why you would refuse something you know to be correct, and have recommended medically more than once to others—”

“I don’t need chemicals,” Newt interrupts. Just...get this, Hermann, he thinks. Try and understand. The paper on the bed underneath his hands rips, as he leans harder. “I don’t like to take what I don’t...need.”

A moment, where Hermann sits, very still, considering. His mouth has gone strangely gentle, for him. Also the light is doing wonders for his cheekbones, Newt notices. His stomach hurts, his breathing hurts, and he feels horribly exposed, his pants leg still rolled up, his lip swollen and stinging. Hermann’s eyes flick to it for a second, then back up. Newt tries very hard to sit still. Sometimes it’s really difficult to do that when Hermann looks at him, but today it’s actually not, even with that honey gaze on him.

“...I understand.” Hermann pauses, nods at him, and sits back.

Newt nods back, his throat sore, wanting to sag with relief – wanting, really, to climb into Hermann’s lap in that chair and rest his forehead against the hollow of his throat, feel hands slide warm up his back, but whatever. Hermann isn’t really gentle like that, anyway. He thinks. He doesn’t *know*, and he never will. So. “Thanks.”

“Although,” Hermann continues, picking lint or something off his thigh and then running a thumb along it unconsciously, once. “I have to point out that you are *completely* contradictory.”

Uh. *Hey*. Newt stares. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I have *seen* you imbibe alcohol to wipe concerns away. Or simply just to...drink.”

“Oh, pff.” Newt waves a hand, kicks his leg once. “Drinks don’t count. Like when you’re on a diet!”

Across the room Doctor Itami laughs, once, high, and Newt grins at him. When he looks back at Hermann, Hermann has a completely new expression on his face. Compassion, indulgence, amusement, or confusion. All at once, maybe? Hermann shakes his head, a little, lips quirked.

“You are *unwaveringly* nonsensical.”

“Thanks, man.”

The doctor pronounces him free to go, and produces a brightly coloured candy from his white coat pocket when Newt jumps down, jacket under his arm. “I don’t have lollipops, but this is from my personal collection.”

“Oh, doc.” Newt beams, taking it, and opens it as he walks with Hermann back to the lab. Orange sherbet, awesome. The sour/sweet makes him wince, and he sucks on it, hard.

Hermann looks at him askance as they walk, uncomfortable. “*Must* you?”

He crunches it satisfyingly in his teeth, in answer, and makes Hermann roll his eyes. Then he realises something. “Oh! You gotta meet Jessie, now.”

“Jessie?”

He chews, molars stuck together. “New Programmer. She who hit me with her bike.”

Hermann pauses just as Newt gets to the lab door, then flails forward and uses his *cane* to hook the back of Newt’s jeans, to stop him, gently. He still *urks* backwards a little, and nearly swallows his sweet whole. Still, that was *cool*, even if it makes his side hurt. Hermann is *fun* when he lets

himself be fun. Or forgets not to be. Newt laughs at him, over his shoulder, as Hermann hisses, “*Explain.*”

He doesn’t really talk to Jessie for the first few days, after that. Newt feels kinda bad for her, it wasn’t exactly *all* her fault, but he’s too busy being smugly pleased and a little *moved*, shit, by Hermann’s bitchiness on his behalf. So he just goes with it.

Kickass.

Chapter End Notes

"Oh frabjous day." - Newt is quoting *The Jabberwocky*. Because he's that sort of person.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

84,000 words in, I think I...might be going a bit pear shaped, guys? O_O

Translation

Herzlichen Glückwunsch zum Geburtstag - Happy birthday

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

[2019...]

Hermann's 30th birthday passes in the blur of a failed Breach destruction attempt.

It was a stretch, anyway, and he'd tried to explain that although they now had the location, the data and sonar reading still only gave the conception of it as a *place*, not the true dimension. He didn't have the exact dynamics yet and could not guarantee that a bomb would destroy *anything* – or anything useful, at least, and he'd rather wait for a little more certainty.

The Marshall, Hawkins, had shaken her head and insisted.

“We are all in agreement to try. Trust yourself, Dr. Gottlieb. We do.”

He'd *attempted* to clarify, but, no.

Thus, it *doesn't work*, and Newton and the rest of the lab watches with him as the bomb simply detonates somewhere along the sea-bed, un-and-many-fathomably deep down, and does little of any use other than to show them what *not* to do again.

Slowly, as the aftereffects and the truth starts to come through, they all shake their heads and peel off, going home or to bed. Dr. Baker leaves last – Dr. Jessie Baker, who has, in actual fact, proven herself to be competent, efficient, and patient, and whom Hermann begrudgingly has come to appreciate. She and Newton seem to be working especially well together. They have created a form of shorthand on their notes to each other on results that Hermann has already spotted, cracked the code of immediately, obviously, and frowned at over Newton's shoulder.

When it is just the two of them left, Newton slumped back in his chair with one ankle on the other knee and his arms folded, Hermann turns away from the screen to stare across the room.

“*We* need to get extremely drunk,” Newton says, as if in answer to an unspoken question.

Hermann currently loathes the very *idea* of moving. “You apparently think this is the answer to everything.”

“Come *on*. Birthday annihilation is a plan!” When Newton stands up, his spine cracks, after four hours of tense sitting. Hermann looks up at him, feeling utterly drained.

“Is that really wise?”

“Nope.” Newton hooks his elbow and pulls him to his feet, wringing a slightly embarrassing noise of surprise out of him. “Fuck it, we’re going.”

And Hermann, because he has decided to attempt to work *with* this person, and because he cannot think of a strong enough reason not to, goes.

They end up in a vile place which considers beer coasters to be a form of decoration, which is so busy that they practically have to share a barstool. Every single resident of Sydney appears to be there as well, drinking away the depression of a failed Breach-closing. The atmosphere is... interesting. Layered. Everyone seems to be blindly and fixedly forcing themselves to be alcoholically *apathetic* about the whole thing.

Hermann, after his initial protestation, eyeballs all of the whiskey behind the bar - *all* of it – and then orders a draught beer, same as Newton. He considers it for a moment when it comes, with a perfect, pleasing inch of head, then lifts and downs it in four mouthfuls, wiping his mouth on the back of his shirt-cuff afterward - because he turned thirty years old exactly, technically, 2.4 hours previously, and the influx of kaiju could well be never ending, and why bloody *not*.

Newton halts with his glass halfway to his own lips so that he can stare. Swallow. “...You alright there, Hermann?”

“Dr. Gottlieb,” he corrects, automatically.

Newton sighs, puts his beer down. “Fuck. Okay, so, you both need *and* deserve this,” he warns, then shoves Hermann in the upper arm, making him slop the end of his drink on the bar.

“You—!” Hermann gapes, then elbows him in vicious retaliation. “*Ingrate.*”

Newton, rubbing his own arm, smirks, salutes with his own drink, then finishes it, quickly. Very quickly. Hermann doesn’t watch his throat, and lets his attention drift across the bar instead – which is not an easy thing for someone with a mind like his own to achieve. Newton ought to consider himself lucky, also; Hermann *could* have gone for the just-healed bruise and tender ribs on his left side, but did not, because he is above such things. Also, he doesn’t like to think of it.

There is a TV above them in the bar that catches his eye, and then, inevitably, Newton’s. They watch the news footage for a moment. The helicopters and warship and freighters, the dead fish on the scummy surface, the foamy waves.

“*Honestly.*” He rolls his stiff shoulders, then orders two more beers, morosely. “What a complete...” He searches for the phrase in English as the beers are pulled in front of them, and fails to find anything better than: “*Cock-up.*”

Newton chokes as he reaches for his fresh beer, then snorts, grins hugely at him sideways and clinks his pint against Hermann’s. “Nice.”

“Of course.”

“You shouldn’t take it personally, though, man. Military types get an idea and they’re *off*. Gone.” He waggles his free fingers. “I don’t really know why you’re *surprised*. They never really listen to us once they decide on an idea.”

“That’s rather a generalisation?” He turns to peer at Newton. He has froth on the end of his nose.

“It’s *truth*.” Newton wipes it away as if he’s unexpectedly read Hermann’s mind. “Just forget it. Your math is amazing. I mean, it’s *crazy*, but you know your stuff, and you said you weren’t

convinced. We all know how much *you* need to be certain.” He points, and Hermann scowls, but he’s correct, of course. He taps his toes irritably against the foot-ledge of the stool. This is why he checks, and re-checks, and on and on again. Perpetual, infinite loops. Why Newton, who forces him to explain before he’s even had *time* to doubt himself, or (more rarely) clicks onto it perfectly and then trusts it, implicitly, is so fitting to work with. “They just... Should have listened to you.” Newton tilts his head, something occurring to him suddenly. “We should just start our *own* ‘dome, dude. Without the guys above us getting in the way.”

“Ahhh, I see.” Hermann nods, to himself and the bar. “This is your need to rebel coming through. Of course.”

“...Wow. I was *supporting* you, you utter bitch, why are you turning this around on me?”

“I, unlike *you*, whilst I may...disagree with the actions today, do actually have some modicum of respect for authority.”

“No you— *what?!?*” Newt’s voice turns into a *laugh*, a shriek of laughter. “No you *don’t!* There are plenty of people around here you purse your lips at and generally ignore, who are way above us in the paygrade.”

“I have—”

“Noooo, do not even try that. You only respect the people you think have earned it.” He is gesturing with his glass, sloshing beer all over the show, and apparently not caring. “Like Pentecost, the pilots, your pet favourite philosophers and mathematicians. Ooh shit, who’s that other guy, Peter Moore?”

“*Sir Patrick* Moore—”

“Oookay - and Harold, and *don’t* complain, you love him, I *saw* you bring him coffee yesterday. Just. Stuff like that.”

Hermann remains silent, at first. He really ought to stop being shocked by Newton’s eerily accurate summations, one of these days. *Bugger*. Finally, he closes his mouth. Fine, if they’re attacking each other with home truths, then here’s one:

“Once again, you fail to grasp the complexities of the situation.”

Newton scoffs. “Oh yeah?”

“Yes. Because to my continued bafflement, I respect *you*.”

Sigh.

He had to admit it at some point. Today seems as incredibly ill-fitting a day as any other, so why not. Take *that*, Dr. Geiszler. Newton does, digesting, and Hermann lets him, *knowing* and *enjoying* only too well how uncomfortable it feels.

“The manner in which, of course,” he adds, after a moment, a sting in the tail just as Newton gets accustomed to one thing, “changes perpetually day by day. Percentage-wise I would probably say it’s only there 18% of the time, so.... Don’t get too excited.”

“*Ohhh*,” Newton replies, finally, exhaling long and low. “Retribution.” He smiles, then, bright and lovely and *smug*, and clinks his pint against Hermann’s *again*. “I fucking knew it, you asshole. This feels *so good*.” He beams around the bar as if everyone should be noticing. “I *knew* it!”

“A ‘thank you’ would have sufficed.” The barman is staring. “You needn’t look so *self-satisfied*, the feeling is tentative, at best.”

Newton laughs.

Somehow, much, much later, Hermann finds himself on the beach at past 4am with his trousers rolled up and his shoes tied around his neck. He is...yes, he is *extremely* drunk, sitting on the edge of a hastily built line of concrete along the sand with one leg out and the other knee bent so that he can rest his forehead on it. He can feel the strap around it through his trousers, against his nose. His feet are bare. Where are his socks?

He realises that he cannot remember.

His head is spinning.

There are a number of empty beer bottles in the sand next to him, and the memory of more in the past hours, with various faces as well. Definitely some enforced tequila. And a lot - a *lot* of singing. *Not* by him. ...Necessarily. He *may* have stood on a table but that was because Newton had got on one first and Hermann had to clamber awkwardly up there - but not *too* awkwardly, meaning that he might have to go and thank Doctor Itami as his knee is absolutely moving a lot more fluidly these days, and he’d managed some grace - to get him *down* before he *fell* down, and cracked his ribs again, but someone had called ‘Speech!’ as he straightened up.

And. Well. Hermann has never been one to pass up the opportunity to point out to a roomful of people just how witless they are.

Newton had laughed before he’d even really got *started*, unfortunately – i.e. *interrupted* him – and then stepped in front of him to start off the singing again. And, for God’s *sake*, everyone *joined in*.

Aussies, honestly. Worse than the British.

Worse than the *Germans*.

Someone is still singing. Someone – no, Newton, *Newton* is singing, loudly, still in the sea. Possibly singing *at* the sea. Hermann looks up to confirm and yes; high tide and Newton, thigh-deep in the water, a familiar shape a few metres away with his back to Hermann, his arms spread wide, singing an entirely made-up song at the dark, cloudy sky that is essentially *shouting* with *rhythm* about the acoustic quality of waves, of refracted noise, of vectors and soundwaves and all the fish and squid and sea mammals which are irradiated by now, which is apparently some depressing awful *shit*—

He has a lovely voice, though, meandering as it is. Hermann had had *no idea*.

Next to them, just behind, the lights of the cranes and builders, working on rebuilding things that Hermann cannot ever imagine being completed. Light bouncing off the waves and Newton’s soaked, shiny jacket. He turns to look back toward Hermann and his glasses are two bright panes of reflection, his body a small and fixed point against the wide beach and waves.

“You will *absolutely* get hypothermia if you stay there. Or some sort of disease.” Hermann finds his voice is croaky, when he raises it. Perhaps he *was* singing?

Newton snorts. “Nothing will have polluted this far or strongly, yet, and you do not have anything *resembling* a medical degree, *Hermann!*” he sing-songs, loudly.

“Where are my *socks*, *Newton?*” he replies. This is important to him, immediately.

Newton sighs, turns fully and starts splashing back out of the water toward him. His jeans cling to his legs, and it would appear that his feet are bare, too. The imminent panicked *fury* that Newton might, possibly, and in genuine likelihood, have thrown his own boots and Hermann's socks *into the bloody sea* covers any other thoughts that Hermann might have. Might *have* had, once. Not anymore, no.

He stares around himself in bewilderment as Newton walks, and talks.

"I *don't know*, man, how should—ew—ha!" Startled, he looks back quickly as Newton, a tangle of seaweed having wrapped itself around his bare ankle, kicks it off by hopping, *giggling*, wobbling, almost falling over - then carrying on when he's free, splashing the edge of the water up ridiculously as he exits. "How should *I* know?"

Hermann sniffs. "I am looking after your boots—" He had forgotten this fact, actually, but lo-and-behold he'd just spotted them and there they *are*, next to him on the sand, neatly arranged with the socks inside in such a way that only *he* can have done it, for Newton, so he covers it with the appearance of knowledge. "The *least* you could do is locate my socks."

Newton *pffs*, flopping dramatically into the sand next to him, which inevitably sprays water and grit all over him. He pulls a face, wiping a fleck off his cheek and flicking it away. Newton does *not* look guilty.

"I *said*, Hermann, I don't *know*. Did you eat them? Because. We should have eaten." Newton sags, suddenly, blinking *very* slowly. "We *really* should have eaten."

He cannot help but agree. "I did not even have *cake*." He props an elbow on his thigh, his chin on his hand, and stares out at the sea. "On my birthday."

"You and your sweet tooth, dude."

"Hm."

Silence. Newton, after a pause full of quiet and the pleasant rhythm of waves, reaches out and gently touches Hermann's calf, brushing sandy fingertips up the back of it, just above his ankle.

Hermann is so surprised that he slips off his own hand, nearly biting his own tongue. He turns to gape at Newton, astonished, as he scrabbles backwards instantly.

"Shit, sorry! Sorry! I got distracted, you—Uh, you have *legs*, I dunno, it's a *surprise*—"

"What on *earth*—" He feels lit up with fury, rushing hot up his spine. "How *surprising*?"

Newton, still leaning backwards, licks his bottom lip uncomfortably, then grimaces and throws his arms wide, attempting to *smile* at Hermann. Enraged, Hermann shivers and lunges for the ground, so that he can flick a handful of sand in Newton's general direction.

He is hardly a sportsman, and well past *merry* and into what is genuinely approaching *wankered*, as Dietrich would say, thus his aim is typically poor, but he's close enough to splatter Newton in the chest.

He has glasses on. He'll be *fine*.

Speaking of, Hermann's are...somewhere in his pocket? He frowns and looks down at himself, as Newton coughs out sand, patting his own jacket down to try and find them, ignoring Newton and *ranting* in his mind, things going hazy at the edges as he does - touching him only because he's

surprised, what an absolutely unacceptable *arse*, he thinks, savagely, don't you touch me just because you're *baffled*, tip back your head and *grip* me—

He shivers again, chilly. Sobriety is a mental state, and June is the beginning of winter, here. Which is completely, *inversely*, insane.

Newton chuckles, muttering to himself, and scuffs fingers through his hair to get the sand out. Then, he watches Hermann for a moment. Then, wriggles back carefully, carefully - and finally stretches out when Hermann does nothing else to retaliate, except glare at him.

He leans back on the concrete blocks next to Hermann, kicks his legs out in front of him. Flexes his bare toes. Hermann, finding his glasses, breathes on the lenses to steam them up, then rubs them clean on his sleeve, and puts them on so that he doesn't lose them again. His hands are shaking. Because it's *cold*.

"Hey." Newton glances at him, then away.

He folds his arms against the breeze, ignoring him. "What can you *possibly* have to add?"

"Hap— Uh. *Herzlichen Glückwunsch zum Geburtstag?*"

Hermann turns his head, slowly, to level a look at Newton, who appears – well. Drunk. Sand in his hairline. Nervous. Gentle. Large, liquid eyes, behind his spattered black frames.

Hermann sighs, and pinches the bridge of his nose. He has, despite his best intentions, and from what he can remember clearly, had a *wonderful evening*. He finds it in himself to pat Newton on the arm, once, vaguely. "Danke. "

The sun comes up pinkish and ruddy. They make it back to the Shatterdome just as the morning shift changeover happens. Newton complains the *entire way* that his jeans are cold and rubbing him, and Hermann points out that no-one *forced* him to walk into the sea. He doesn't actually entirely remember if that is true. One can only assume.

He gets a few hours of sleep. He doesn't get hypothermia. He *does* have a disgusting hangover the next day, but at least he isn't alone. When Vanessa manages to charm her way through directly to the lab connection, since Hermann has left his phone in his room, in order to wish him Happy Birthday, he winces at her shouting down the line and Newton, working at his elbow, snorts. Then hisses, touches his forehead briefly, and opens a drawer to get out his sunglasses and put them on inside.

"Totally gutted I didn't get to take you out and get you filthy drunk," Vanessa pouts, somehow audible over the phone. "Surely that's my *job*."

"It was a one-off," he clarifies, distracted as he watches Newton, sunglasses-clad, not even see Jessie approaching sideways until she touches his shoulder and makes him jump.

"I'm glad you had fun, though."

"That would depend upon one's definition of 'fun'."

Of course, Vanessa then decides that this is the *perfect time* to admit, in a rush, after a moment of abrupt, pregnant silence, that she can't lie to him on his birthday and that she went on a date with Dietrich back in January - and then another - and will possibly go on a third?

Which most *definitely* snaps Hermann's attention back to the phone call.

“I wasn’t going to say anything but I really feel I need to tell you now, um, we’ve, *I’ve* hated keeping it from you but I never thought it would *go* anywhere, but maybe now it *will*? Bloody hell, Hermann, I mean...*fuckballs*, how could you keep it from me that in the last few years Dietrich’s gotten really *buff*?”

This is patently *not true*, he wants to point out, dazedly; Dietrich looks as much like a baffled eagle owl as ever.

“And you know he’s got the balls to take the piss out of me, to make me *laugh*, which is—”

At that point, hungover, and *nauseous*, Hermann has to hang up on her.

They do not discuss it for a few days. She eventually agrees, begrudgingly, by email, on a policy of *Do not. Tell me. Anything.*

“Oh dude, *I* could have told you that,” Newton says, when Hermann, utterly astonished, has to sit down heavily, and predictably Newton then pushes him about what could be wrong until he admits it.

“What. Do you *mean*?”

Newton’s shoulders round as he shrugs into his lab coat. “I got CC’d accidentally on some email a while back. Don’t think your brother meant to send it to me, it was supposed to go to some guy called Norman? And it was basically just exclamation marks, so.”

“...This is a perverse nightmare.” Numbly, Hermann takes some ibuprofen, and later almost puts his glasses on upside down.

In July, another kaiju makes land in San Diego. ‘Clawhook’ is an apt name.

“Those ungul are *insane*,” Newton points out, unnecessarily.

He then proceeds to go *loopy* over the samples he receives, after it is killed. They keep him occupied as the end of the year approaches.

Meanwhile, Hermann continues to attempt to map something he hasn’t been able to actually *see*, but knows is there, working through the riddles of data and confused vectors. An infuriating opposite to the shapes in his mind, which he can see perfectly, in *3D*, and navigate through like flying, but never accurately describe.

Hermann also feels that another kaiju will be coming, by the end of the year. Once again, he cannot yet be *accurate*, but the more data he gets, the better his model becomes. It feels irrationally like looking forward to another attack, having this burning wish for more information. Starting to needle him, like a stabbing pain behind his right eye as he goes over and over his numbers. The Jaeger are doing well and losses are low but still, the slight dread, the anticipation...

Newton feeds him data from his own findings, Hermann sends his own back, they’ve reached some sort of equilibrium in which Newton is only scream-inducingly irritating once or twice a week, rather than every day, and Christmas approaches, inexorably, again.

December 16th, another kaiju emerges near Manila. Three Jaegers are deployed to take it down. Newt watches 4 things at once - the TV screens, the code feeds, the interpreted data and the faces of everyone else in the main 'dome.

This is way too much excitement and stress for his heart to *take*, surely. He's getting old, on top of everything. His 30th birthday is approaching fast and fuck knows Hermann had a bit of a breakdown around his.

He actually said *cock*.

Newt just did not need or expect to hear that, ever, ever, *ever*, and now he cannot *stop* hearing it, and had finally snapped and thought about it once – just *once* – with his fist wrapped around his own and his teeth digging into the long healed gash on his lip, his eyes screwed closed, but whatever, *details*. He's decided one annual falling off the chaste wagon is acceptable.

Horrible and stomach-leapingly, excitingly *gruesome* as it may be, watching the kaiju in action is so much more satisfying than seeing disparate pieces of them on his table. Newt's working on a theory, for which he needs to see them in action more frequently, and his simulator updates are due again, soon, as well, so he starts watching the records, again, of the last few kaiju attacks.

This includes the one that attacked Tokyo in April, which had all been a bit too fucking close to an old home for his unsettled, fidgetty liking. Chernobyl Alpha had taken that one down, in the end, in tandem with a particularly awesome Jaeger from China, Crimson Typhoon, which has 3 fucking arms to match what he hears is triplet Pilots. *Triplets*. A pretty wild and *stimulating* thought, but Newt's happily biased; he is *all* about Chernobyl, and really, watching those gorgeous marrieds in metallic action was like...some sort of poetry, he supposes. Brutal, beautiful. Like the kaiju - not that he will ever, ever compare anyone to those again - which *no*, wasn't exactly what he'd meant, but close enough to make him definitely realise that it was not a narrative path to go down more than once.

He finds himself idly composing haiku, still, as he re-arranges the new samples: Manila, Tokyo, San Diego and Puerto San-Jose. Humming under his breath. It's a great distraction, a different way to re-route his thoughts and energy as his hands are busy. It's also probably a good thing he never got an email address for either Sasha or Aleksis, or he'd be tempted to send them on those insomniac nights when he's had too much Red Bull and feels *weird* about spending all his life searching for weaknesses in something and working next to the sexiest brain he's ever encountered – that being Hermann's, not the section of frontal lobe he's just received. So he thinks about it. Maybe Pol or Khamisi could send them on? ...But, shit, no that's Aleksis' thing. Right. He shouldn't tread on those massive toes.

Still.

Oh Kaidanovskys / my figurative boner / is suffering here

Which *about* sums it up.

Hermann occasionally glances away from his own numbers to look at Newt's, when he pauses and looks up from chemicals to count out syllables on his gloved fingers, thinking of lines in his head, but he doesn't mention anything about it, intrigued as he might look. Newt's got quite the mental collection, now. Which he will never actually *inflict* on anyone, no, unless they specifically ask, but it's a thought.

A group of carefully-spaced thoughts.

Harold, who may be a biochemist but is a gentle soul, has started to find the growing global popularity of the BuenaKai, the kaiju cultists, increasingly alarming. He starts turning off the news whenever they're mentioned.

He has a little something in common with Hermann, there, who with his apparently latent but deep-rooted faith of *some* inexplicable kind that he won't go into *any* detail about, but Newt is certain would contain square roots and symmetry and the most mysterious math problems in the world, finds them less unsettling and more...perplexingly fascinating. But, illogical.

"No one seems to see the glaringly *obvious* discrepancy of thinking that *alien monsters* have come specifically to target us for *human sins*," Hermann sighs, one day, when Newt is washing up sample beakers and Hermann, in his usually neat, mad style, is wiping a perfect palm-width border of clean space around the edge of all of his blackboards. Newt doesn't know *exactly* why, but he can pretty confidently speculate: to frame the data within a new perspective. A way to look at it fresh eyes.

On occasion, Hermann makes *perfect sense* to him.

It's actually more unsettling than the other 80% of the time when he doesn't.

"I mean good *grief*," Hermann continues, rubbing his temples and getting chalk on them, "the world contains a mind-boggling amount of stupidity."

This is essentially the tune he was (almost) singing on a table, in a bar, with his shirt un-tucked and his cheeks rosy and one of his shoelaces undone, back in the summer. No, not summer, winter. Shit. One of Newt's fondest new memories. Hermann, weaving a little, with one finger in the air and a cowlick curling in his hair from the damp, over-crowded heat of the bar, berating a group of drunken, depressed Australians. *Amazing*. Even if Newt had quickly needed to step in and derail, just in case someone mustered enough care and offense to punch him in his pouty face. There went that sixth sense Newt has for that particular line and when it is about to be crossed, flaring up again, and preventing something bad.

Hermann just doesn't know how lucky he *is* to have Newt on his team.

...Team Hermann.

Ugh.

"Uh, hate to point this out but you're pretty illogical yourself?"

Hermann gives him one of his Looks. "Meaning?"

"Weeeell..." Are we really going here? Does he really wanna go *here*? Newt pushes his glasses back up, smudging suds all over them – they could probably have done with a clean, so that's a win. "Okay, you *asked*, remember. So for one thing, you complain that poetry is '*utter rot*'—" His accent, here, is on *point*, he'd like to note, but Hermann is definitely not looking as appreciative as he should be, "—but you've found a way to get science to support your faith, which if you ask me is a pretty big, *poetic* filling in of gaps you can't see?"

"Oh, come *on*—"

Nope, he's on a roll. "And let's see, well, maybe that you wholeheartedly accept evolution, of course, thank you, but I bet you also think prime number spirals in *shells* and cicadas and polyglons in nature and bla bla *bla*, somehow explains religion?" He turns back and carries on washing as he talks, because he can multi-task, but Hermann is currently slowly locking up into

spasmodic shock. “Uh, what else. Thaaaat you apparently choose who to respect based on some internal, moral code that has no basis in logic but, in fact, on *feelings*, which you *have* - that you never believe anything any politician says – I’ll give you that one - because you are smarter than them, but you can get behind the notion, at least, of a creator, albeit multi-faceted or metaphorical or Islamic or Buddhist or Christian or Jewish or similar, purely based on some long dead bearded guys or some oral storytelling, with no scientific proof—”

“Do *not* use the ‘scientific proof’ argument on me when what you actually refer to is *visual* proof,” Hermann hisses, and at some point he has stalked across the room to step in close to Newt in contorted rage, or maybe embarrassment, or maybe pure shock that someone has the nerve to get up in his face and tell him like it *is*, Newt doesn’t *know* - why is it half of the time he is so easy to read and half of the time translucent, like frosted glass. He prods Newt in the shoulder with a long finger and he jerks, he is so shocked, his hands still in the sink, then leans right back into Hermann’s space with a *scowl* because—

“Everybody on the planet can see how obsessed you are with appearance,” Hermann is saying, face pinched and pale. “Of *course* you need to *see* and *touch* everything before you can deal with it, I’m surprised you don’t taste everything that comes into the lab as well—”

“Hey!”

“Really, Newton,” Hermann continues, glaring in even closer with his eyes narrowed – Newt knows his gloved hands will be slippery and lack purchase, and this is probably good or he might reach out and *strangle* Hermann, but at this stage his fingertips would just squeak and slip straight off his carotid artery, and Hermann’s eyes *burn* into his - “This vain focus on your outer shell has been getting *old* since day *one* of our acquaintance, and is fairly easy to see through – and shallow – because *I* see you, Newton Geiszler, there you are: choosing to specialise in the kaiju because you think they *look* incredible and you somehow find that awe-inspiring visage enough to believe and follow, even when it puts you at odds with others, even when it actually *puts you in danger*.”

He pauses, his breathing up, panting – is he *annoyed* on Newt’s behalf for the *risk* of what they do? Newt stares at him, confused, angry. Is he pissed off because—

“You present this *image* of yourself as the rock star—”

“I *actually* fronted a band, you dick, I naturally and have *always* dressed like this—”

“—and you work so hard not to look like what you are, which is a science nerd, I *know*, and instead you craft this ridiculous look and run straight into the realms of vanity—”

“Coming from the guy who looks like he just crawled out of a 1950s laundromat—”

“—and even going to far as to *ink* your preferences into your very *skin* – admirable to be so very yourself and fight to remain so, but why take this *risk*? *Why* are you so *blind* to the mere suggestion of living quietly, even when *you* know you ought to temper your behaviour, when you could change to protect yourself but you wilfully will *not*, even when you *know*.” Hermann points, savagely, then balls his hands up in fists by his sides and continues to throw words at Newt so quickly that he can’t think how to answer. “I’d bet you’ve never been truly scared a day in your life, you *idiot*. And here you mock *me* - you *mock me* - for having the conviction to believe in something that you cannot *see*?”

He bites out the last part, his teeth physically clacking on the perfect pronunciation, then glares at Newton with deadly accuracy.

Neither of *them* need claws to injure one another. It's so much easier, this way.

"I..." Newt gapes at Hermann, then swallows, furious. Of course he's been scared – he's always scared, but he carries on, he's always *on his own*—His knees are trembling but his pulse is pounding, hot. He is all at once *so angry* he could scream.

"I wasn't *mocking*, fuck, I was just. Just *saying*."

"You say *so many* things that lack meaning, how am I to know?"

Ohhhh *shit no*, he thinks, snarling at Hermann, and pulling his hands out of the soapy water to half-twist and shove him back, so he can get some air. Two wet handprints on Hermann's vest. Hermann almost stumbles, but rights himself by grabbing the counter, and then just gives him a fierce, amused expression, as if to say *I knew you would do something so base*.

"Fuck you," he spits.

Fuck you for getting it right, Fuck you for knowing just where to stab, for seeing through every defence and knowing exactly what hurts, for being so savagely unique and brave and blazing that Newt is hard against the sink - that the blood has drained from his face and illogically gone straight to his *cock*, fast, throbbing, so he can't even *move* - and Fuck him for being so *him* that Newt wants to lunge and grab him by the collar and kiss him, to swallow him up, to eat him whole and *never let him go*—

They stare at each other, silent, chests rising and falling, steady.

Abruptly, Hermann lifts his chin and looks away, then turns on his heel and limps out. He takes his cane on the way, and slams the door. And Newt wants. Newt wants to *kick* him. Newt wants to follow. Newt. *Wants*.

He's never had anyone be that honest with him. Never had anyone be that brave, or see him that well.

And he weirdly just wants to say Thank you, thank you so much, but *damn* you got a few things wrong, let me tell you about them, *please*?

He runs his damp, shaky hands through his hair, and staggers to a seat, to drag his thoughts back into order. Into agreement.

A few hours later, Hermann knocks on his door. He glares at him through the peephole, then swings it open halfway, propping his elbow against it so that he can lean.

"More illuminating insight to share with me, Dr. Gottlieb?" He sounds impressively confident, cocky. He is totally *not*.

Hermann taps his cane once, uncomfortably, on the floor, glances down and then up, and sets his shoulders. "I owe you an apology for earlier."

He loses all conviction, at once. "Me too."

"I— Oh."

They stare, again.

"I...pushed too far," Newt admits.

A curt nod. "As did I."

"...Good."

"Yes."

Silence. Newt swings the door a little, playing with it, nervous, suddenly, then stops. "So...okay?"

"Fine. Yes."

"Great."

It's only later that it occurs to him that neither of them *actually* gave the apology they agreed that they owed.

They don't discuss again. The next time they see each other, they simply...choose not to. They just acknowledge, ignore the gaps in the logic, and move on. Newt, having taken his annual sabbatical from the focused friend-zoning he's had going on, and been doing *so well* with minus one slip up, goes back to the sane place: where Hermann is worth singed fingers because he is important, and Newt can hold his chin high. No-one's perfect, okay. Him least of all. He's fine with that.

Maybe Hermann isn't, but hopefully one day he will be.

Just before the New Year, he finds Hermann reading an article on the kaiju cults on the couch in the lab. It's mad, *masochistic*, maybe, because that is still a sore fucking topic – but it looks like a personal print-out of a British newspaper, so Newt is intrigued.

He doesn't recognise the title of the publication but he *does*, however, when he quite obviously leans over Hermann's shoulder to peer and gets a tutt right in his *ear*, recognise the writer's name.

Bastien Gottlieb.

"Huh." Newt crosses around the couch, juggling the two apples he just stole, one for him and one for Jessie. Giving Hermann a bit more space. They're still being *careful* around each other, just a touch. "I always forget your *kleiner Bruder's* in London."

"Mm-hm."

"Isn't that where your friend Vanessa—"

Hermann flicks the top of the printed paper down. "Yes? And?"

Wow. *Issues*. "Nothing, I just—"

"They occasionally meet for coffee when she isn't working." Hermann sniffs. "...Possibly to get at *me*, somehow."

Newt doubts it, but who knows. He leans a hip against the desk, in thought. "But. Isn't she dating Dietrich?"

"Yes."

"So that's—"

"It's all very *incestuous*, yes, and no, Newton, I will not discuss it, and I will *not* allow you to use my family as a soap opera for your entertainment."

“...Okay, bitch, I was going to say ‘cute’ and/or ‘potentially really sexy’, but whatever.” He takes a crunch of apple. Chews. “Freud would be loving you right now, by the way.”

Hermann swears at him, and disappears behind the paper again. Newt watches him, thinking. “... Bastien *still* chasing that big story, huh?”

The top of the page lowers again, this time just so that Hermann can roll his eyes at Newt. “Unfortunately.”

“Why doesn’t he just come visit? Surely he could get—”

“Do not even *think* it.” Hermann looks appalled. Newt grins, amused, then thinks to add something.

“What about from your dad, maybe? He does like writing all those official memos so *often* and with so much *detail* about PPDC plans...” It’s a not-so-private joke, between them. Or, no; Newt tries to joke, on Hermann’s behalf, while Hermann just goes quiet, and seething, but nonetheless what Newt can read as *appreciatively* still.

Gottlieb Sr. has not called here for his son in the last year at *least*, and Newt has noticed.

“No.” Hermann pauses, then re-crosses his legs. “...I am sure our Father would not leak private details.”

“Right.”

Hermann looks uncomfortable, and the particular choice of words smacks of *distance* and something else, so Newt changes the subject.

“So those guys built another kaiju church?”

“Yes. In *Lima*.”

“No! *Man*.”

They live in crazy times, Newt supposes. People need to find some sort of sense. Personally he *loves*, he fucking *revels* in the lack of it, the not-so-mundane, sometimes, is just *so* great – down the rabbithole and all that, as long as he’s got a headtorch and a dissection kit and some coffee and a good soundtrack to go with it, and, in a sense, he normally does – but people need to find explanations. People need a reason, or the lack of one drives them mad.

Hermann needs to find the equation; Newt needs to map out the very DNA.

He privately agrees a bit with Hermann, too; always did, from the beginning, that just got lost in the argument. Time and *perspective* on the whole thing.

Thinking that the kaiju have come just for something as insignificant as cheating on your husband, or coveting your neighbour’s shit? That this is some cosmic punishment for beating the crap out of someone, or that secret, dirty kink some guy might have about wetsuits and whale sounds and jelly – Newt *loves* the internet - or any of the other petty, fucked up shit *homo sapiens* enact every day - which let’s face it, is often the same as in the rest of the animal world and sometimes not even as wonderfully *fucked up*?

Weird as people think the cultists are - and he gets that, he really does - well. Come *on*. In his opinion, they’re just working *inside* the box. A punishment from above? Please. It’s all just so

predictable.

People don't know how to think *big* or *differently*, anymore.

*Desperation blows. / Blue blood's unholy cool, but / royal it is **not***

Yeah.

These are...not good.

However, Newt needed a new hobby, so it works. His *used* to be irritating and/or watching Hermann, occasionally done simultaneously, but that was last year. Now it's just irritating and the still bizarre, still new, 'occasionally really enjoying his company, when he doesn't rip my guts out with his barbed little voice.'

The other one was so 2018. *Passé*, yo.

And here comes 2020, so.

Chapter End Notes

Please feel free to read into haiku what you will. Is it figuratively for Hermann, which Sasha knows about, or his love for the kaiju, which they're killing, or for the Kaidanovksys themselves?

DEEP INTERTEXTUAL MYSTERY

~POETRY~

YEAH

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Thank you to ama for handholding on this one. <3

Also I am not a doctor, though I know a bit about knees from my father, but I do love me some google research (my search history for this fic is terrifying) and I've done a *lot*. However, if this is wildly *wrong*, please do let me know.

[2020]

Newt chooses *not* to get pass-out drunk on his 30th and instead blows out candles on a cake the more interested half of the lab team bring him. The choice of his favourite, chilli chocolate, and the quiet, falsely disinterested gaze that he gets when he breaks into a grin at the sight of the cake all scream to Hermann being the instigator. Herman *also* gracefully cuts and then savours a second slice, without asking Newt if it's alright to take more, because that's who he is. There'd be no point asking; Newt would have said no, just to fuck with him, and Hermann would have helped himself regardless, as if he hadn't even spoken.

Newt grins some more.

The well realised flavour and mass of mismatching candles must mean that Harold was in charge of the practical side, and the insistence on eating it raucously in the lab at 8.30am is all Jessie, even though it's a *Sunday* and most of them aren't on shift. He isn't technically, either, but then ends up spending the day working anyway.

At around 5ish he agrees to one beer, but then suggests calling it a night, exhausted from some very long days before it researching a kaiju theory that's probably somewhere between a pipe-dream and a snatch of paranoid insanity. He's watched and re-watched a split-second bit of footage from kaiju (MN-29) in Manila, where it looked like maybe it had paused, just for a second, to *observe* - but Newt couldn't be sure in the chaos of the battle and he'd thought perhaps he was just reaching, or going mad, or projecting too much.

Hermann had basically pursed his lips and suggested the same thing, when he shared it, so.

Tonight, Newt has nothing but plans to skype his parents and Hanna, and goes back to his room to do that. And really, he's happy enough with that. It's not exactly how he pictured his 30th, but being cool doesn't always have to involve trying *too* hard.

About 3am he wakes up, however, paying for that sensible decision. Because he is 100% completely wide *awake*.

He lays in bed for a bit, eyes stubbornly shut, hands flat on his stomach under his t-shirt, tapping out a rhythm against his skin as he tries to focus on things that are insignificant or boring enough to send him to sleep; the way his boxers have ridden up around the back of his thighs, how many heartbeats it takes him to get from his room to the lab, possible anagrams for 'kaiju versus Jaeger' (*Java Jerkies Use Rug, Sake Jar Urge Jive Us*, these all feel somehow directed *at* him). Then he

thinks about where his next ink's gonna go, how far the chest piece should stretch down - and that does *not* really do the job, because now he's anticipating it, wants it, wired.

Which is an anagram of *weird*.

He sighs, kicks the covers off completely, and gets up.

A walk around the 'dome, to try and tire himself out. That'll do it. He makes a split second decision that it will. He doesn't need to turn the light on as he gets dressed, since he put the boxes he hadn't gotten around to unpacking in each corner of the room and stacked everything on top of them, instead of in the middle – learn and response process, see, he can grow as a person - so there's nothing to trip over anymore. Easy. He snags his glasses from the floor by his bed and steps into sweat pants in the dark, pulling them up with a light snap of elastic against his belly and then clipping his badge on the pocket, nudges on his Cons without lacing them properly, yawns as he does but feels bright, awake. Maybe something more drastic than walking, even, then - he's never checked out the gym here, thinking of it. There must *be* one for the Pilots. Not exactly something he does regularly but it'd burn some energy, and, well, he's not *freaking out* but he is into his third decade...

He pauses, glancing down, then flicks his eyes toward the mirror in the corner and the vague outline of himself. Twisting towards it, he flexes a bicep for a second.

It all looks good to him, but. Huh.

He pulls a sweater on over his head, then shuts the door behind him with a flick of his fingers, hopping quietly down the corridor. Does he need to start exercising? He thinks about it as he walks. His heart *does* get enough work so his cardio ought to be pretty good, what with the way it jumps every time the Breach ruptures – or splits – or spontaneously expands and snaps back, or cracks? They don't *entirely* know - and another kaiju comes through. Or whenever he gets an email from Khamisi. Or when Jess sneaks up on him in the lab and makes him jump, which is a thing that she has now decided is *hilarious*, particularly because it works really well as she's the same height as him, and even though she's giggling loudly at him he has to laugh too, because she is *adorable*, and a hot, smart woman laughing with you is better than *at* you. And she is. Hot.

He might have thought about that.

His heart *also* stops whenever Hermann touches his mouth in thought but he's got better about that one, doesn't think about those fingers on the nape of his neck anymore - actually normally his heart feels worse when he manages to make Hermann laugh, properly, leaping and kicking him in the sternum at the smile lines on his rare, scrunched-up amused face. Or when Hermann sits and rubs at the muscle just above his knee with his thumb, under the cover of his desk, where he thinks no-one will see.

Fuck, he's taken a wrong turn. Newt loops back towards the 4th floor.

Physical exercise has always worked for him - if he can tire himself out enough, his brain will eventually go quiet. There's something about the metallic quality of the 'dome at this time, too, all the empty corridors, the night crew occasionally appearing and disappearing, normally with huge goggles on distorting their features, that gives him an idea of tiptoeing around a Vogon ship, and that amuses him no fucking end.

He's easily amused, no big deal.

He's so amused, in fact, that he stops thinking about anything else but where he's going, lets his

feet follow what he can picture as he reflects on the mental map he has, from a vague memory of looking at the Shatterdome's layout. Yeah, that was the spec for Tokyo, but they're all basically the same. Newt *feels* like there's a gym around here somewhere. Maybe he can stick his head in and just take a look. Breathe in some of that sweaty plastic smell of expended energy – maybe inhalation will be the first start to motivation.

He skips the elevator in favour of the rarely used stairwell, all concrete and metal, sliding casually down the metal bannister and nearly losing his balls between the 6th and 5th floors, and eternally grateful then that no-one was there to see him leap off in sudden precognition before the angular corner. When he sees the sign for floor number 4, he kicks the door open with a hum and hops through - then nearly trips over his feet and slams a shoulder into the other side of the corridor with a shout of "*Fuck—!*"

He clutches his chest, collapsed against the wall as Hermann, with the door an inch from his nose, levels a look of shock, awe and intently focused derision at him.

"Oh my *god*." Newt lunges and yanks the door away from him. "Did it hit you?"

It slams shut, and Hermann flinches at the sound as it echoes off down the deserted, dim corridor, then continues to just *look* at Newt. So Newt looks back, quick. Hermann's got pyjama pants on that seem to be about 50 years old, the worn blue fabric gone soft and thin, a sweater, sneakers – *sneakers*. Newt licks his lower lip, glances up and down under the weight of Hermann's stare. A beat, then Hermann frowns and Newt opens his mouth.

"What are you doing?"

They asked each other at the same time.

Hermann tutts and scowls, but Newt grins.

"*Newton*," Hermann's gritted his teeth and Newt just smiles some more; he hasn't actually *done* anything.

"Couldn't sleep."

Hermann doesn't look like he believes this. He's got a bag in his hands, too, Newt notices.

"Where've *you* been?" he asks.

Hermann looks down at his bag, following Newt's eyes, and then defiantly lifts his chin.

"That is absolutely none of your business."

Newt scoffs. "Ohhhh I don't think so, man. *Spill*."

And, it's *chilly* in the corridor, but not so cold as when Hermann starts walking again in answer, holding the bag tightly so as not to overbalance his movement or bounce against his knee. Newt rolls his eyes and then jumps to catch up, matches pace with him, and just keeps talking.

"Okay *fine*, if you won't talk I'll just theorise wildly, then. We know how you like that."

"Wonderful." Hermann is staring stubbornly ahead. "That could either be an ill-placed assertion that *I* do it, which is not true, or acknowledgement that *you* do it, which is - but I find that I do not care enough to try and work it out."

He's heading for the elevator like his ass is on fire. Newt keeps up, and just laughs.

“You just ponder that. So *anyway*, I'm thinking you *might* have had a booty call, as fuck knows that when we've bumped into each other at weird times before you're usually more formally *dressed*—”

He gets a vicious sideways glare, but that's better than Hermann hitting him in the stomach with his bag, which he'd half expected, so he carries on.

“—*butttt* there's no bedrooms on this floor, so, no. You *could* have just robbed the engineering department of shiny tools and mechanical secrets to sell but since you won't even answer your little brother's pleas for information for an article when he calls, every week, I'd say probably not.”

Hermann snorts, somehow, in *and* out of his nose, derisive and righteous, reaching the elevator and stabbing at the button.

“So...bag of cookies? Colour-coded whiteboard pens you've stolen from the other labs? Laminated pictures of Pythagoras for your bedroom? I could keep going—”

“*Please* don't—”

“—but lucky for you, I'm a genius. And kind-hearted. I knew the answer right away.” He folds his arms, standing next to Hermann as they await the elevator. “I just like to torment you.”

“Refreshing honesty.” Hermann taps his foot, looking up at the floor numbers. “A new degree of maturity for your birthday?”

“Hey, pot, I'm kettle. You've been in the gym, right?”

Hermann stops tapping his foot. Goes still. Newt decides to risk continuing before he can say anything.

“For your knee? I mean, it's obviously for your knee, it's not going to be for your pecs. Or. It could be. Which would be fine.”

Swivelling with a sound of pure *rage*, Hermann glowers fiercely down at Newt as much as he can. It's really an impressive one - top 10 of all Hermann Gottlieb glares ever, he's possibly even gone up on tiptoes to add that extra level of height, and Newt really wishes that he didn't find people who are taller than him much hotter than people who are smaller, but that was a self-preservation thing, since practically no-one on Earth is shorter than him. So he almost shrinks back at the force, and also to remind himself *Nope you're stopping that **stop** that*—

“I do believe I said something about there being a lack of *you* having any entitlement in this situation,” Hermann hisses, in his face.

This, Newt's used to. He shrugs. “I'm just interested because you—”

“I have absolutely *no* wish to discuss medical matters with you, Newton.”

“*Hey*.” He pauses, a little hurt, a little...*buzzing*, trying to think how to word this. “Hermann. You can't social faux-pas *guilt-trip* me and emotionally blackmail your way out of this. I'm not going to feel bad about asking you out of interest and *concern*.”

Hermann just works his jaw, thoughtfully, and more than a little uncertainly. Newt *sees* him swallow and knows he's almost there, so he pushes a tiny bit further, and also to lighten the mood

because Hermann really needs to *relax* about this. “I should absolutely have a free pass on my *birthday*, to ask.”

Hermann raises his eyebrows. “Oh *should* you? *Really?*”

He nods. “Yes. Come *on*. We’re...no, okay, I can say it if you won’t, we’re *friends*.” Crazy, crazy, his brain sings. “I...” Suddenly, this all feels deeply important and he licks his bottom lip, a little nervous, but also sets his jaw. “I’ve known you for 4 years, man. Longer, really, if you count the pre face-to-face conversation online—”

“Which I do not—”

“Which you *don’t*, no. But. *Seriously.*” He leans back on his heels all casual-like, so that he can keep his eyes on Hermann but also give him space, as his lab partner watches him carefully, wound up all tight and *stupid* about something that’s such a small part of him. Newt has never understood the need for all that *privacy*, for inattention, as if their eyes can slide off it like it’s not there or they don’t care enough about him to want to know, like it’s not part of the whole package deal.

Okay, sure, a lot of people on this planet *are* incredibly blind, Newt agrees there - but he always wants everyone to see him exactly how *he* is. To like him, like that. And he likes Hermann, even with all the awful, ridiculous things he is. Stop fucking hiding this from me, you prick, he thinks, I don’t hide anything from you. Well. Not really, anyway. Usually Hermann gives back as good as he gets, so come *on*. Little push, tiny steps.

“Am I allowed to ask you about it yet? You *know* I could have done earlier.”

Hermann looks at him, silent. His eyes look dark in the dim. The elevator *dings* and the doors open, then close.

“That is true,” Hermann finally admits.

“It really is. I have stopped myself like a *trooper*. It didn’t even say when I hacked your personnel file, which is great, because it fucking *shouldn’t* have, but you know my investigative nature.”

“You mean your bloody-minded nosiness.”

“Sure.”

Hermann purses his lips, then sighs, and hits the button again so that the doors open. “Oh, for goodness’ sake. Fine.”

He walks into the tiny box and Newt scrabbles to follow, as he hits the right button then puts his bag on the floor between his feet, leans an elbow against the handrail, puts his hands in his pockets, and pointedly, *stupidly*, avoids Newt’s eyes. “I will allow 3 questions. Call it a birthday treat.”

That sentence should *not* be a turn on at a time like this. Newt nods quickly, turning sideways to fold his arms and rest his shoulderblades back against the side wall of the elevator, and pointedly, *cleverly*, stare at the side of Hermann’s head. “So you had some kind of knee surgery, right. Something small-ish. It can’t have been a whole replacement, I’ve seen you kneel on it. Not something degenerative. Something violent? Muscular, not bone, or it wouldn’t be swollen so sporadically. Ligament?”

“I...” Hermann, who turned to him in surprise right around *small-ish*, has his mouth open. “... Yes.” He takes a breath, straightens. “Yes. MCL and meniscal cartilage tear. Mostly.”

“‘Mostly’. Right. *Ouch*. So a fix and some tissue replacement there... And your thigh?”

The startled look that runs across Hermann’s face is kinda heartbreaking. Newt smiles, ruefully. “Dude. *Biologist*.” He points to himself, then, gently, vaguely, at Hermann, with a thumb up that is *not* meant to be patronisingly helpful, but demonstrative: it’s a thumb, *singular*, up. “You. You run your thumb down it sometimes. When it aches, I guess?”

Hermann nods once, tightly, then turns back to face the doors as they open. His shoulders are up, high. It looks like his hands are fists in his pockets. That or he’s really, really pleased to see Newt, but that’s definitely not true, and also, *no*.

“I have a pin in it,” Hermann explains, stiffly. “Sometimes, when it’s cold...” He tilts his head, a ‘so-so’ gesture. Newt nods.

“Right. So what happened? And yes I know I’ve had three questions already, actually 3.5 really, I squeezed in a half, but spill. I know it was an accident. It’s obviously not something you were born with.”

Hermann frowns at him. “‘Obviously’?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t seem like an old problem, and I knew it wasn’t something that could have come on slowly or you’d be better at dealing with it, so it always had to be an accident.”

“...Are you *actually* complaining that I am not good at being *disabled*?” Hermann looks like he’s swallowed his tongue.

Newt gives him a look. “I’m *saying* you’re better at using your cane for other things. Like moving blackboards around or smacking ankles or hooking your cups of tea when you can’t be bothered to get up and reach for it, yeah I saw that, than at *actually* using it for your leg.” His raises his eyebrows right back at Hermann, in a mirror of his movement. “Yeah, you switch hands all the time - which is cool, don’t get too dependent, keep symmetrical and that, but it’s still obviously an afterthought for you. I could tell when I met you that you couldn’t have had it for long.”

Hermann is now gaping at him, and Newt knows that he’s unquestionably said too much at about the same time that he realises that he *hadn’t* realised how much he’d thought about it, or noticed, but there we go, thanks *insight*. He feels he should keep talking, it can’t really get worse, and also, actually, this is his area of expertise, bitch, you’d better recognise. So he shrugs. “I worked on reconstructive tissue pre-kaiju. Did a lot of work with nerve rehabilitation, skin knitting. Post-injury observation. Hey, you might have my work in your knee!”

They’ve reached Hermann’s floor and the doors ding again. Hermann blinks after a second, picks his bag up and walks out, and so Newt follows him - *not* like a puppy, like...something big and badass. He can’t think what right now. Hermann’s pinched and pink-cheeked, like he’s embarrassed, which is so *asinine* Newt wants to scream, and he might also want to hug him, which, *fuck*, no, Hermann would brain him with the aforementioned cane. Wait. *Wait*. Is the cane the Macguffin in this situation, Newt suddenly wonders, slowing a step—

“It was a skiing accident,” Hermann says, apropos of Newt’s internal struggle. “Fractured femur, wrenched up knee. A bloody predictable mess, frankly.” He glances at Newt, then unclips his door badge from his pocket. “Really, Newton, it’s fairly *banal*. Skiing accidents are so statistically likely.”

Oh right, act apathetic *now*. “Not sure that ‘banal’ is the word I’d have picked for that,” Newt replies.

“Mn.”

They’re at Hermann’s door now. Newt walked him here, like some sort of teenager. Teenage dirtbag. He drums on his thighs once as Hermann unlocks his door with his card, to fill the silence.

“Well, shit. Sorry, man. You skied since?”

Hermann stares at him, after twisting the handle down with one angry, wrenching movement that lifts his sweater and reveals a frayed, soft line of elastic running around the top of his pyjama pants, where the fabric has worn away, and what used to be a *name written on the waistband*, in biro. Those pants actually look older than *Newt*. And. Hermann is glaring. What?

“That is *another question*, Newton.”

“So?”

Hermann sighs. “Use your *brain*.”

“Right. Nope. ...Shame.”

“Not really.”

Newt watches Hermann open his door, slide his bag in, and then stand in the space of his doorway, and is reminded of someone, back in Tokyo, and then thinks of something— “Hey! Does Dietrich ski?”

Hermann curls his fingers around the doorframe, considering him. “Every year.”

“Awesome.”

“*No*.”

“You going to the gym though, uh.” Newt thinks about shaking his hand, maybe? Then, *nope*, and slides his hands deep into his sweatpant pockets instead. “That *is* great, my man. Good stuff. I’m proud of you.”

Hermann flushes a beautiful, obvious pink, right across the tops of his cheeks, staring at him. Newt feels really weird and fizzy-stomached about all of this, and really pleased, and *touched*, and. Shit. “...Well, my goodness,” Hermann says, and turns abruptly to face his room, “I’ve had categorically enough of this for one night.” He starts to close his door, then seems to think of something. “...I’ll thank you to keep this to yourself?”

Newt’s turn to scowl. “Hermann. Who do you think I *am*? Seriously?”

His lab partner’s turn to look a little abashed. “I just wanted to confirm.”

“Yeah, yeah. Confirm you’re a *bitch*.”

“Lovely.” Hermann scowls, and slams his door, and Newt, shocked, opens his mouth to *yell*— Then Hermann re-opens it, leaning out through a little gap, his chin high, but not before Newt sees a glimpse of him with his lip in his teeth for one flash of a second, for one little nervous heart’s *tick*. “I. Thank you, Newton.”

Newt gives him a two gun salute, attempting to smile supportively and not *too* annoyingly, which is not an easy thing to aim for. It seems to work. He then tries not to melt into the corridor’s floor when Hermann’s nodded and closed his door. Or rub up against his door.

So. There's that. Knowledge is a heady thing. Newt fucking *knew it* had to be an accident. Not that it changes anything, but. It's good to know.

It's good to *get* to know.

Ouch.

Weird enough as that all was, however, it's nothing to how much February throws everyone a curveball. February 29th, when a kaiju named Knifehead comes barrelling out of nowhere to fuck everyone's *shit* up because it seems to know a little something as well - it appears to respond. It *does* respond. It waits, it *ambushes*, and it half destroys a Jaeger named Gipsy Danger, from Anchorage.

Newt recognises the name of the Jaeger from the footage of Yamarashi, but this the Cat III *tops* that one, and this time one of the pilots dies.

The kaiju are *learning*. This is huge, *huge*, and worrying, and over the next few months everyone's fears – part of the idea he'd considered, he fucking *knew* it, he is *the most observant*, he needs awards - are confirmed.

Things get bad.

Then worse.

The reaction is explosive; the news that the kaiju might be developing *battle strategy* is not something any of the 'domes can keep a lid on and the press go mad. The surviving pilot, after managing somehow to get the Jaeger back to land – props for that - disappears, after exiting a medical centre weeks later, in a flurry of camera flashes through which all that can be seen is blonde hair, and then no-one hears from him again. Pentecost is on TV a lot, looking as broad and stern as always. No sign of his daughter. Newt glances at Hermann across the room, and Hermann is already looking back at him.

The PPDC have to hold conferences, politicians shout, plans are made and re-made and everyone's freaked the fuck *out*, looking for an answer that no-one has.

They start working later, and later. There is never enough coffee. Jessie falls asleep across her desk one day and Newt does *not* look at her tits where they're pressed soft against the surface when he leans over to gently wake her up, because no-one deserves that shit, but she smiles at him all soft, after he'd touched her shoulder and she snaps open her eyes and sits up, and that's better.

The new analyst gets replaced, again. Australia is *always hot* and it's messing with him; winter is in summer and the temperature never gets below 60 and Newt misses snow, which is not a thing he ever thought he would, after a childhood in Berlin he remembers, NY, or Vladivostok, which he could not forget.

In May, there's another attack in Ho Chi Minh, for which one of their adopted home's Jaegers, Striker Eureka, gets deployed. He recognises it - it was also out in Manila. The Pilots are Hansen and his kid in that one, Newt thinks; he's seen one or both of them striding around the base on occasion. Their dog is *cute*, but also really shouldn't genetically exist in that stubby form, and that's *cool*, cross-breeding and selection is fascinating, but the breathing does make Newt wince. He could probably breed that out of the line, if he had time...

Anyway. This kaiju swims *upside down* and rampages around for 2 days. Newt dribbles a little bit into his coffee at the new samples and Hermann elbows him, in the sternum, very accurately.

In July, Harold gets partnered with a new biochemist assigned to their team, and basically wipes the floor with him.

“Idiot,” he sighs one evening after his new partner’s shift has ended, rubbing at his ink-black hair in frustration and looking across the mess on his desk at Newt for help, and behind him, Hermann gets this little look of something like *pride* and Newt has to swallow a snort. “Look at this! My Grandmother could see how bad this is from *Mumbai*.”

“You tell it,” Newt agrees with him. “*And* he doesn’t even like Mona. What’s that about?”

The new biochemist is not a fan of their impromptu mascot painting, which is hanging on Newt and Harold’s side of the lab. Hermann had threatened to set fire to it, but even he’s stopped wrinkling his nose at it now.

Harold grins.

Things look up in September. Newt’s humming along with the radio in the kitchen with Jessie, making his sixth coffee, before Jessie says “Um,” loudly, and then shoves him up against the fridge and kisses him.

“So, yep,” she says, when she moves back, already biting her lip but with her eyes bright.

“...Huh.” Newt licks his lips. She tastes like peach lip gloss, and he feels like she just punched him, in a good way.

Jessie grins, nervously. “Thought I should tell you I’m really into your face, Newt,” she breathes, then laughs a little at herself, blushing. “I. Bloody hell, that was supposed to sound better.”

“I liked it,” he points out.

She smiles, softly.

“Although, hitting me with your bike is a funny way to show—”

“Shut your *gob*,” she laughs, hitting him in the arm, but he catches her hand, and, careful eyes on hers, tugs her a little closer, a little further in. She goes with it, putting a hand against his chest just as he puts one, gentle, on her lower back. She’s smaller than him, which turns him on less than people being taller but what does that matter, she’s fucking amazing and she smells so good and he’s— an idiot? Has she been coming onto him, has he not fucking noticed because he’s been sort of semi-blinkeredly *not* pining—

“Did I miss something about this?” He needs to check.

She smiles. “No, I’ve been cool about it,” she says, and then touches his jaw a little bit. “I’m not asking you out, I really just... I’m. Knackered, and nervous, and I like you. I really just want to fuck you, can we, can we do that?”

Woah. Newt’s had some – a *lot* — of fun in other ‘domes, with other colleagues, but always from different departments. Keeping it in the same team feels...a bit too close, now, after deciding *against it*, and was a thing he’d normally thought to avoid, but also. She’s *asking*. He swallows, immediately, painfully turned on.

“Are you, uh...*definite*, on that? Because I am— I am a *go*, you’re gorgeous, but I never really even *considered* and you should know I’m kinda—”

“What’d I say about shutting up?” she asks, laughing, and then kisses him again when he pulls her in fast.

He can’t believe his luck, really. He hadn’t – he’s not blind, even if he is a little distracted, sometimes, but he hadn’t even *dreamed*. She’s crazy-smart, and her eyes are blue, and she’s soft, and she can drink him under the table.

She lived in Sydney before the ‘dome was built, so she hasn’t needed a room inside, meaning they end up rushing back to Newt’s room. She makes a face at the mess but then just laughs – so she *must* like him. He’s so. Not *surprised*, he’s a rockstar, but. ...Okay, a bit surprised.

He fucks her against his door, over-eager, both of them only half-undressed, and she moans and thunks her head back against the metal with her arms linked behind his neck, taking him in, knees over his elbows and her cunt so *hot* even through the condom that his hips falter. He groans into her throat, thighs aching as he holds them both up, and one of his palms bruises against the metal studs on the door hinge, but he’s not stopping, not, not, nope.

His muscles *kill* the next day, but it’s worth it.

She wakes him up by sliding a palm over his hips and then traces the outline of Yamarashi on his arm her fingertips. He’d forgotten, for a second, when he first opened his eyes, what had actually happened, and takes a second looking at her, even though he’d had his head mashed into her shoulders all night - until he remembers, and grins, and stretches back to encourage her to flop down on him, all her and her soft-soft breasts and cyclist tan-lines and hair.

She rolls her eyes and prods him in the diaphragm, instead, which sucks.

He can’t quite get his head around it. But casual sex is a thing he can do though, hello. She’s up for it, he’s up for it, *yeah*. She’s amazing, and quickly becoming one of the few things in his life which is shiny and great at least once every couple of weeks. Work is shit, kaiju are coming quicker than expected unless you’re them, with Hermann’s predictive model and his wild, tenacious drive to fully understand the breach that’s meant he sort of skipped his 31st – even though Newt pointed out it was a *prime number* year – because he was busy, working in abstracts, whilst Newt was across the room seriously considering stabbing the glass vial in his hand with a scalpel, just to see which would shatter first, and into how many pieces. Which is not the first time he’s wondered about that. Not by a long way. Uni, for example. More than once.

Also, he’s been waiting too long for someone to come up with a way to draw out and classify the chemicals in kaiju glands properly, so he’s gone with fuck it - which has been a working impetus pretty frequently since he was 13 – and is working to create his own. The only name he can think for it is ‘the milking machine’, which he thinks is diagrammatically great until he’s mouthing at Jessie’s pale, pebbled nipples on his bed and it pops into his head. *Ugh*.

When he jerks back and pauses, she whines and yanks his hair to complain that he *stopped*, and so he has to explain. Her shocked laugh is gasping and high.

“Oh my *fuck*,” she says, covering her face with both hands, then shakes her head and leans forward to pull him out of his boxers, twisting their positions as she rubs her thumb under the head of his cock and makes him shudder, juddering as she moves them both and then shoves him back onto the pillows.

“For that, you get *this*,” she grins, opening a condom with her blunt fingers and deftly sliding it onto him, then climbing into his lap - and what she means is, she doesn’t let him touch her until she’s come, gasping, riding his dick.

He *really* doesn't mind.

In November, 'Atticon' makes land in Seoul and displays a tongue longer than anything they've ever seen on a living creature, whipping across buildings and spitting blue. It's sick, but he also *feels* kinda sick, too, at the destruction it makes, the look of it once it's been killed, the quickly growing unsettled feeling across the globe.

Someone's put forward an idea to build a defensive Wall. A fucking *wall*. It's bullshit. Hermann's dad is backing it publicly and Hermann's starting turning the TV off whenever he comes on, which is pretty obvious a move for someone who took 4 years to let Newt ask him about his leg, and still sort of flushes when Newt asks him if he's been on the bike that week, or occasionally throws pens at him, but Newt appreciates the unconscious trust that shows. Or maybe just the built-up apathy. Either way he doesn't care enough to hide his discomfort at the Wall – which, hiding his discomfort is probably not a thing that Hermann ever did much, but that's cool. Newt wants to wipe out the mere mention of the Wall as well. He's not naturally pre-determined to like dividing concrete structures in the first place, no, but humanity responding to a serious new threat by hiding behind a wall is just a *neolithic* sort of attitude, and not in the good way. This isn't exactly learn and respond. It isn't even fight and flight, it's just...*stupid*.

'A mind-boggling amount of stupidity', Hermann had said, and yep. Newt is with him on this.

In December, Hanna skypes Newt and tells him her new job's been doing well – she's DJing nights in NY. Started off small as a favour to a friend, but she fell in love with it, and though it's not what she dreamed of doing, her nights are getting more popular and she's crazy for it.

Newt's not exactly doing what he originally wanted to be, either, but he is so, so not complaining.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Translation

Verteidigung's a vollkomma g'sunda Strategie, Hermann, und's eine, die wir untersuchan müssan. - Defence is a perfectly viable strategy, Hermann, and one we must explore.

Heads up; this one is really long. SORRY. Hermann would not *stop talking*.

Also, this one goes out to **Sanna**, for the things that she knows about, and all the other asdfjlsfjlkfj stuff, too. Whore. <33333333333333333333

[2021]

There's little respite for any of them in the new year, as another kaiju makes land on the 20th of January. Bangkok, this time.

It's the day after Newton's birthday, and Hermann knows that some small part of him will take it as a present, his eyes wide behind his glasses as they watch the feeds, his lips parted. The kaiju is named 'Hidoi', and Newton looks personally affronted at that because he thinks the opposite - that they're all *beautiful* - whereas Hermann thinks it looks far better after a Jaeger with only 50% of the arms that the kaiju has kills it, bisecting it messily near an enormous golf course.

Hermann always did enjoy percentages, though.

Things have been fairly *dire* for a few months and, as one lab, they have all upped their caffeine dependence by at least 8% in response. Questions from Marshall Hawkins on the Breach structure come almost daily. Meanwhile the Wall concept is, Hermann fears, a dangerous joke, and he has attempted to make his Father see this.

His predictive model shows him increasing projections of size for the kaiju, but he cannot be certain on the exact frequency yet, nor on the vulnerabilities of the Breach. It all feels rather like a memory he has of changing through channels on an old radio set they had found in their shed, when he was 11.

He'd rebuilt it with the help of some reference books, then searched through it in their room, after Bastien had fallen asleep, turning the dial to pick through the crackling radiowaves for the correct signal. Different voices, different languages. Like this. Most things were unintelligible, but there was the occasional burst of *something* familiar, echoing across a void he could not see but imagine.

Last year - and still, now - the evidently developing *cognisance* of the kaiju had taken everyone by surprise, including Newton - though he did have that fraction of a wild theory that Hermann has to admit was stunningly intuitive. *Hermann* can intuit the Wall falling, one day, to increasingly large and heavy kaiju, though he also hopes, of course, that it does not - he truly does *hope*. He is not actually anticipating the end of the world with any satisfaction, much as he has earned the moniker

of miserable in his 31 years.

Newton called him 'The Grouch' a few years ago, for which he has still not been forgiven.

Vanessa phones from London at the end of January, and after her usual catch up, Dietrich comes on the line to say that he's gotten a job at UCL. He moved in with Vanessa last autumn and Hermann continues to reel a little from that, though he's become accustomed to the news, since the first time his brother was able to talk about it to him, mainly consisting of bullet-noted ramblings about her eyes, her hair, how he's never felt this way, how the timing seems so perfect *now*, etc etc and on and *on*, and how *could* Hermann have kept her to himself like this?

"You've known her almost as long as I," he points out, whilst in the background Harold and Newton chatter about chromosomes and chemical markers, Newton sprawling across the computer terminals between their desks to gesture expansively. Hermann turns his back to them and covers his other ear, so as to hear his brother.

It's 9am in Sydney which makes it 11pm there; Dietrich was marking essays, he'd said, with Vanessa on the computer next to him quite obviously enjoying the praise, and occasionally leaning over to shout things.

"Yes, but not as *closely*," Dietrich protests. "I was missing out on so much. *Now* I am a lucky *Scheißkerl*! You— yah? Ah, that's—" A pause, while he says something aside to Vanessa's question.

Hermann moves the phone away from his ear, looking up to the ceiling as he counts to 5, then brings it back. "—*and* have you heard her speak Bajan?"

He is ridiculous. Hermann purses his lips. "No," he replies, "I've gone deaf as well as increasingly blind."

In the background Vanessa snorts, loudly, and he has to smile to himself.

'Not as closely', though. Hmn. Hermann then spends much of the afternoon with a feeling of dread and, deeper still, perhaps anticipatory *viciousness*, over whether or not Vanessa will ever tell Dietrich that she had, in fact, lost her virginity with *him*.

He doubts that she will. She isn't so crass.

...Usually.

Still, he *doubts*, just as he re-checks and considers all options in everything, relationships, and work. Takes his time to think, instead of simply *acting*. He pores over the information coming in on the Breach and redraws the diagrams, plotting a slowly growing image. It is an intangible thing with no fixed shape yet and he *loves* that challenge just as much as he loathes it.

He also loathes attempting to convince Father about the Wall. This is a continuing conversation that he does *not* have over the phone, as he will only trip over words, still, partly from anger and partly from having just too much to *say*, which frustrates him utterly as he is normally able to express himself so well. There is also the fact that, whenever they speak, he ends up being horribly rude, after which he cannot shake a deeply rooted feeling of *guilt*.

This is all a perfectly natural but also carefully ingrained response as a product of their upbringing, particularly having had an often absent Professor for a father, Dietrich has intoned to him more than once. Attempting to help, he knows, but now this just makes Hermann pinch the bridge of his nose.

He would like to point out, also, that he does not actually take pleasure in being rude to his father, who until his early twenties he was fairly close to.

Well. Not a *lot* of pleasure, anyhow.

The last time they attempt to discuss it over the phone is in early February, when Father calls from a hotel somewhere around Washington. Hermann doesn't get the chance to ask precisely where.

"Verteidigung's a vollkomma g'sunda Strategie, Hermann, und's eine, die wir untersuchen müssen," Father says.

His particularly Bavarian cadence rumbles through, as if reaching Hermann's ears directly from his childhood. Then he clears his throat, which is a specific personal tic of his, and Hermann finds that he needs to set his jaw against it, so as not to mimic it.

"I'm fairly certain defence is *being* explored," he replies. In English. To make a bloody *point*. "Giving up on forward movement to build something so passively *static* feels rather backward, to me."

There is a pause before Father's next words, as if he wonders whether he ought to use them - but then does so anyway.

"It is *not* giving up. It is for our protection, to gather strength. I should have hoped that you might see that, after spending so long working on the Jaeger programme with me in those early days."

Hermann stares into the wall of his room opposite him for three seconds of astonishment, unmitigated fury, and something *churning*, before snapping.

"Father, if you cannot see that we designed and built the Jaeger rather aggressively for *attack* as well, then might I confirm my hypothesis that we inherited these bloody degenerative eyes from *your* side?"

Then he hangs up, in a little shock at himself for being so blunt, and in lieu of anything to better that comment.

Honestly. He'd stayed with Dietrich in Berlin whilst he did what his Father had referenced, trudging into TU every day with his knee strapped up and his brand new cane rubbing the heel of his hand raw in order to create the code, to advise and *get* advice from people in four different parts of the world by video connection. What on earth did Father think that work *was* but a complex mixture of fight and hold back, a beautiful combination of mechanical, physical engineering and intangible, abstract coding? Herman had worked furiously for weeks to find the key to both destroying and defending, and yet still, Father wishes to *separate* the two.

It ought to be no surprise to him, really. He sits a little longer on the edge of his bed, legs stretched out in front of him, then drops his chin to his chest and rubs at his eyes, exhaling, and shakes his head to himself.

He never *could* explain to anyone entirely what he had meant, it ought not to be a surprise. Still means. The fact that the synesthetic numbers in his head are perfect algorithms, but also dimensional *art*; that flying is also just equations, and the body nothing without the correct angles and order of mathematics engraved on and ingrained into every part. Nor that that they all come together to give him *faith*, not *fear* - but then he has come to suspect, increasingly, as he gets older, that in a bizarre reversal of much he'd held dear, that it is one Dr. N. Geiszler who might well be the only person chaotically unsymmetrical enough to hold two ideas so entangled together, in *his*

brain, as well as Hermann can in his own.

For example, the fact that he continues to work *with* the organisation hell-bent on eradication of the creatures he admires so much that he has had them tattooed.

Hermann's ideas, however, work together flawlessly, even if he cannot explain exactly how. Sinuously, enmeshed. They are not *diametric*.

Whereas, Newton *is insane*.

Thus.

Speaking of holding two ideals, in a show of his usual ability to apparently find everything in the world *attractive*, Newton has been sleeping with Jessie since the end of last year. Or, she with him. However it works, it's clear to all who might pay at least a cursory bit of attention.

They're suited, Hermann supposes; both with their dark hair, freckles and fast intellect. Jessie smiles easily and is, truly, lovely, with her loud laugh and typing even more furious than Newton's. She also has that lean, cyclist's figure. She probably used to *surf*, as well, he can only imagine.

He attempts not to, when he's on the exercise bike in the gym at 1am, but fails, on occasion, as he is prone to do. He is but human.

He has no problem with co-workers together, of course, as long as they are discreet, but three of their number in the lab have been moved to other departments, other Shatterdomes, and now they are down to just the four of them - and Hermann reaches a limit at the end of the month when Jessie brings Newton her tablet, to show him a code she's working up for him. Newton takes it in one hand, his eyes already distractedly scanning the screen, but slides his other hand into the back pocket of her jeans, leaning a hip against her.

He does not even seem to realise he does it, muttering the screen's data aloud under his breath, eyes moving quickly.

The casualness of touch speaks of Newton and his propensity towards tactility, but also of something else. Jessie's lips curve softly and, checking that the rest of the room are working - not well *enough*, because Hermann can see, although he is perhaps *watching* - she leans in and kisses Newton on the throat, right under his jaw. Hermann had—

"Could you *please* have some care for the rest of us and keep that out of the workplace?" he mutters, snapping it fast, under his breath. For goodness' *sake*, he thinks.

Jessie jerks back, surprised, and Newton looks up, his face going still.

"...Woah, dude—" he starts, but then Harold steps over next to Hermann and speaks up.

"Actually *yeah*, guys," he agrees, his voice uncharacteristically hard. Hermann glances at him, askance, to see that he's scowling, making fists by his sides before he folds his arms over his lab-coat. Oh, *bless* him, Hermann thinks, then absolutely ignores that impulse. "It's really uncool," Harold adds. "I, uh... I don't need to see that."

"Oh." Newton glances at Jessie, who is pulling a face, her hands fluttering, and then turns back. He pushes his glasses up his nose. "...Uh, okay guys. Chill. Sorry."

"Yeah, just... No hard feelings?" Jessie asks, and she is obviously uncomfortable. Hermann feels a frisson of regret and frustration at himself, but he cannot answer because Harold jumps in, again.

“Yeah, no, it’s. Uh, it’s cool.” Harold seems to deflate a little, after nodding once, and turns away, but he nods again at Hermann on the way. In some sort of...solidarity? Hermann nods back, after a second’s pause, in which he is momentarily confused – but at least this proves he was justified, not biased, if Harold agrees.

He flicks a glance at Newton and Jessie, then goes back to his own work.

Emails from Father come less and less after summer ends, and that’s fine. Hermann does not wish to dwell on it. The emails he *does* receive usually just avoid the topic of the Wall, now. Father seems committed to pretending that the topic is simply not there. Of course. This is exactly why he’d never told his parents about school; Father would have told him to ignore it. (Mother would likely have flown over to the school and dragged the boys out by their ears, which would have been worse.)

Dietrich’s advice in his letters and one phone call had been to hide, wanting him to stand up for himself but not to get hurt, so just to *hide* until the boys get distracted, or forget - a curious mix of protection and uncertainty, wanting his brother to naturally fight for himself but also never to be hurt, and thus alighting on something inbetween.

This option had, unfortunately, only *delayed* most of the temper flares of his peers.

That one can be compared to Father’s wall, perhaps. Though Hermann can understand the instincts now, as an adult. However eventually, the thing was that he’d *had* to shove a boy back, in more than a little wonder at himself for doing it, though grateful to some ingrained response or preservation instinct from having two older siblings who liked to tickle, and the worst little brother on earth. Two hands shoving Geoffrey Thomas’s freckly face back and then a kick to his gullet, which he’d gotten a black eye and split lip for, both of his knees skinned through his school trousers, but it had worked, in a sense.

He was still called names, after, but there was a careful distance to it, after that.

And there, see. Now *that* was defense *and* offense.

Dietrich’s advice, bettered. Of course.

Email is far better, yes. It allows Hermann some distance for organising his thoughts, keeps he and his Father from each others’ throats. Which happens to be *nothing* like standing behind a wall, he insists, when Karla raises her eyebrows at him on Skype, having called him at an uncharacteristic hour because Father had told her that Hermann is ignoring his calls and she’d thought that she could somehow *fix* it.

In happier familial news, his Mother continues to do well after his Grandmother’s eventual death the year before. She’s joined a local baking society, and she calls him in March to let him know that she’s begun a novel, in which she attempts to trace a societal Western masculine allegory all the way from Jove, to cowboys.

His fond exasperation for her grows after each conversation.

He and Newton continue to spread their work across six adjoining desks and share, on occasion, what feels like not enough *air*, or IQ points (from Newton’s side), without too many issues. Newton still has no respect for personal space, of course, but somehow, even though the conversation regarding his leg last year was...unsettling, he’s found himself easier about smacking Newton in the calves with his cane if needs be, to get him to pass something when he does not want to stand up if his thigh is aching. Or if he simply hasn’t the energy, and Newton is closer.

At these times there comes a look on Newton's face, underneath the irritation, something in the curve of his mouth as if to say *I knew it, I told you so*. Perhaps it is something similar to his own face after calls with Mother. He can only assume. Some affectionate bafflement. Newton does know him as well as Vanessa and Dietrich, now. They are truly *friends*, of a sort, now.

How boggling, and bolstering, all at once.

Newton does, unfortunately, insist on pestering him at least once a month about his leg. Somewhat fruitlessly, since it is never going to be back to normal – Hermann damaged it too much and then ignored it for too long, and Newton, he is sure, must know that as well as he and Doctor Itami do.

A thing that he does *not* know, however, though not so globally urgent as the Breach, is whether Newton's tissue regeneration and replication work *is*, in fact, in *his own bloody knee*.

It's a concept so utterly disturbing that he has spent months considering whether he actually *wants* to know. He told himself at first to leave it alone, but he cannot. Like a hang-nail. Finally, in March, his yearly medical comes up again and he decides on long-crafted impulse that, truly, nothing can be worse than continuing uncertainty.

When he arrives at the medical centre for his appointment, it is a-bustle with staff and what seems to be some fairly major re-organisation. Hermann dodges a young doctor with boxes piled so high that she cannot see over the top of them, half-spinning to watch her go and ensure that she does not bang into the doorframe, then turns back to look through the crowd.

Toward the back of the room, he recognises the back of Doctor Itami's head, with its sheen of black hair and his slim, but curiously wide shoulders. As Hermann looks, the doctor, bending over another box of supplies, suddenly glances up to the clock, checks it against his watch, and turns to the door, almost as if he'd known Hermann was there.

"Dr. Gottlieb." His smile remains boyish, even though Hermann has now adjusted his mental age for him to much closer to his own. He nods.

"Doctor Itami."

Itami beckons him to follow into the back office and he does so, picking his way over boxes and some hastily stacked pillows, and around some most definitely wonky beds that he has to glance back at as he goes. He's also extremely glad he has his cane today - hopping over all the chaos would not be so easy without it.

Itami's office is as coolly organised as always, thankfully. Hermann shuts the door behind him as the doctor sits down behind his desk, smoothing his tie flat as he does. His face is normally absolutely clean shaven, but he's grown a slight moustache and stubble since Hermann saw him last. It suits him, surprising Hermann as he sits down.

"I must apologise for the mess." Itami looks rueful. "We have been informed that many staff will be moving from this department to other Shatterdomes. Or other *jobs*, in fact. Cut-backs." He waves a hand, regarding Hermann across the tidy surface of his desk.

Hermann hooks his cane on the desk, and crosses his legs. "Resources being directed elsewhere. I *see*." By *elsewhere*, he means the Wall.

Itami smiles at him. "Yes." He draws a pair of silver-framed glasses from his labcoat pocket and puts them on, and picks up his notes. "So. How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

Itami lifts his eyebrows. “Illuminating, as always.”

Hermann tries not to look too dour. “I’ve been doing the exercises, I attempt to stretch, and generally there is enough hot water in the showers for bad days. Things are neither worse, nor shockingly better.”

“Hmm.” Itami considers him. “You do know that things never will be shockingly better, Dr. Gottlieb?” he asks, quietly.

It’s unusually blunt, for him. Hermann pauses for a moment, surprised.

“Of course.” Yes, he is already *painfully* and acceptingly aware of that fact.

Doctor Itami smiles again, turning to his computer screen. “Good. I...simply wished to check. That is good.”

“...Good?”

Itami glances at him, sideways, over his glasses. “I appreciate your honesty.”

“Ah.” He hums. “I would never lie to a doctor.”

“*That* is a lie.” Itami scrolls down his touchscreen, his lips quirked.

Hermann frowns. “I have nothing but respect for what you do.”

The doctor snorts, now. “You would simply lie to *the person*, rather than rank and role?”

“I...” He’s lost. Confound it. He lifts his chin. “Yes.”

Itami chuckles at him, openly, turning back to face him and lacing his fingers together in front of him on the desk. “Wonderful. Well, I do not think we require much examination. Just reflexing and some strength testing. Is it strapped up today?”

“No.”

“Good, good.”

The examination is brief. Itami’s hands are cold; he apologises, after laying them on Hermann’s knee and making Hermann flinch, and rubs them together before putting them back on his skin. Squeezing, gentle twisting, a hand over his kneecap as he works it; the same as every time. Hermann can predict everything, including the sounds he makes under his breath as he adds some notes, prescribes some more anti-inflammatories, and then call to Hermann, re-doing up his trousers behind the screen.

“I am pleased that you have kept up the personal physio. It looks better.”

Hermann glances over as if he can see through the screen, then tugs his vest back down straight. “Of course.”

“So.” Itami laces his fingers again, as Hermann comes out and sits down once more. “Do you have any concerns or questions?”

“Yes, actually.” He clears his throat. “I should very much like to see my medical file. I wish to know what techniques were used in my knee surgery.”

“I...” Itami looks surprised. “Well, of course. I could read it for you and translate the medical—”

“That won’t be necessary. If you could simply forward the relevant information to my inter-personnel email.”

“Okay. That is fine.”

He gives his thanks, once, and the doctor smiles his smile again.

“So,” Itami adds, however. “I must also tell you, then, that unfortunately this was our last meeting as doctor and patient.” Itami takes his glasses off and folds them up. “Some funding has been cut from this division and, as the new Shatterdome in Nagasaki nears completion, I have been relocated back to Japan.”

“...Ah.” Hermann may not be entirely shocked, what with the increasing amount of information flying in and out of their inboxes regarding ‘redistribution of focus and funds’, but he *is* genuinely disappointed. Not least because he will have to explain his situation to an entirely new doctor, but in that he and Itami have developed enough familiarity over nearly two years and a handful of meetings to make him more comfortable than normal. He has come to greatly respect the man.

Additionally, he could add that the other senior member of the medical team assigned to cover the science division is fairly twice his age and not nearly so enjoyable to look at, were he so shallow.

Scheiße, he thinks, quietly.

“That is a shame.”

“Thank you. I have been given some notice to organise handover and my belongings, though. Two weeks.”

Hermann *hmfs*, amused, drumming fingers on his knee. “You’ve done well to get that.”

“Yes.” Itami chuckles. “Yes.”

“So.” Hermann stands up, collecting his cane. “Thank you, doctor.” He puts his hand out, to shake.

“Ah, no more. Now you may call me *Kin*.” Itami shakes his hand once, black eyes crinkling, his grip tight and reassuringly brief.

Hermann squeezes back. “Well. Thank you, Kin.”

“Dr. Gottlieb.”

“Hermann,” he amends, and Itami’s face lights up as he nods, respectfully, pleased.

He receives the email the next morning, when he’s bustling about the lab with a bit of chalk behind his ear and three more sticks in his jacket pocket, a screwdriver in hand as he considers the holoscreen. Ruddy thing keeps flickering. He’s been muttering at it since 7am.

He’s re-routed power from one of Newton’s most cursory screens - the man has six, he does *not* need them all – and tightened a loose wire, but still, it crackles at him. He purses his lips. The lab is otherwise empty but for Harold, asleep, tipped back in his chair with his skinny legs up on the console and his mouth open, and Newton, yawning, chin in his hand as he stares at a monochrome x-ray disconsolately, his earphones in, his foot tapping along to something.

Fine.

Hermann leans in, frowns, waits for the exact...moment of *interference*... - and then thumps the machine on the side with his fist.

The image flickers once, then clears.

He smiles widely at it, smugly pleased.

Behind him, someone clears their throat, and he glances around in surprise to see a knowing look being sent his way by Newton, still at his desk, but spun around in his chair to watch.

“Shut up,” he says, before Newton can add anything.

Newton lifts his hands in surrender, even though there’s no possible way he heard Hermann over the noise in his ears, but his grin practically shouts what he would have said.

The email is short, when Hermann opens it, and nicely to the point.

Dr Gottlieb,

Please find attached the relevant sections of your medical report. If you have any questions, I will be here only today; then I will be vacating my office and technically unemployed for two weeks.

A new topic: would you like to get a coffee with me, tonight?

Kin Itami

Hermann blinks. Blinks. Takes his glasses off.

He walks away from the screen to turn on the kettle he’d brought in for himself, when the other one kept being in use too often for his liking, and taps his fingers against his mouth in consternation whilst it begins to boil.

He grabs his cane and walks out of the lab before it’s finished.

Itami is in the medical centre, alone, and looking strange and incongruous suddenly without his coat or uniform; just jeans and a loose, pale long sleeved top. He’s ticking items off a list on his tablet, and his eyes widen for a second before he smiles at Hermann, lowering the tablet.

“Hello.”

“You cannot *possibly* ask me on a date,” Hermann replies, in a furious rush, his mouth just opening and words just *coming out*.

Before Itami can reply, startled, there is a noise, and a nurse Hermann had not realised was there stands up from the floor, where he’d been boxing syringes next to a bed, out of sight. His eyebrows are raised so high that they are disappearing into his blonde hairline.

“‘Scuse me, gentlemen,” he drawls, all Australian and *knowing*, and exits quickly, though not before throwing a crooked grin at Itami on the way. Hermann flushes right down to his sternum, underneath his shirt, his ears going hot. He watches the man leave, then spins back to stare pointedly at Kin.

Itami. *Itami*.

“You...prefer tea?” Itami tilts his head, delicately, considering. “I was unsure of your preference. Coffee seemed safe, but I see that I am wrong.”

“I—Coffee is fine, but—” He sets his jaw, standing, physically, firm. “You *cannot* invite me out.”

“Yes, I can.”

“This is *highly* inappropriate,” Hermann begins, but Itami raises a hand.

“No, please. If I have made you uncomfortable, then I apologise. But...I am no longer your doctor?”

He *hmns*, adjusting his weight on his feet. He’s not uncomfortable, he’s *surprised*. Itami continues to talk, seeing that he can.

“Please. This is a thing I neither imagined nor would have considered, so you must be reassured of this. However. I...” He pauses, then puts the tablet down on a bed next to him, suddenly, and steps closer to Hermann, putting his hands deep in his pockets. He is nervous, Hermann realises, though his own thoughts swoop and reel, startled. “I am now...unexpectedly freed of our previous roles, and I know that I greatly admire you. And people say that when times are desperate, you should – what is that English expression? Grab life by the...testicles?”

Hermann stares at him. “Something like that,” he says, weakly. Kin is rather close to him now. He looks around the room for a moment, curling and uncurling his fingers on his cane.

“I, ah...find myself fairly surprised,” he adds. Kin chuckles.

“That is a shame. You should not.”

He waves a hand. “I do not require flattery. I simply had not...considered this in such a way.”

“Nor I.”

“And yet.”

Kin shrugs. “And yet.” He grins, and his lips curve, lovely. Hermann feels as though someone has wiped his glasses clean, though he is not wearing them; suddenly *everything* seems fraught with double meaning. He glances around again, and straightens his spine.

“...Wine. I should like a date with *wine*. 8pm. *Out* of the Shatterdome.”

He leaves before Kin can do anything else, or he can change his mind.

“This meeting will be another one for the efficiency record!” Kin calls after him, grinning when he glances back to grimace.

The rest of the day is intolerable. Hermann does not read the information on the email; he thinks that he might lose his mind if he found out anything else so startling in one 10 hour period, but it’s unlike him to put something off. He cannot concentrate. He elbows a cabinet when he turns back to his desk from his boards, at one point.

The others seem to pick up on his unsettled mood. Jessie brings him a sandwich when she makes her own and considers him for a moment, hands curled around her plate, after he murmurs his thanks. He notices, and raises his eyebrows pointedly at her stare, making her blink and nod and turn away quickly.

Newton frowns at him through the curves of the holo-viewer and finally drifts unsubtly over in the afternoon, plonking himself down on the desk surface next to Hermann. His little hip bumps the machine as he sits, and it flickers again. Hermann gives him a withering look.

“Yo. What’s eating *you*?” Newton asks.

Hermann tries to shoo him away, jabbing buttons to re-stabilise the image. “Newton, you are an intelligent man, must you resort to hyperbole?”

His lab partner whistles on an exhale, long and slow, pushing his glasses up his nose. “My point exactly.”

“Meaning?”

“Well you just *complimented* me.”

He stops, straightens, and turns to face him. “I did *not*.”

“Right.” Newton grins, swinging a leg back and forward. “So?”

“I’m fine. ...Thank you.”

“Suuure.”

“Yes. Now get *off* of my work-surface before I push you off.”

“Try it, buddy.” But Newton, thankfully, does, hopping down gracelessly.

Kin takes him out of the Shatterdome, yes – to a small bar a few streets away. Hermann had gone back and forth on ironing his shirt before deciding it would be a deplorably obvious amount of effort, but had polished his brogues, and Kin had met him by the gates, smiling when he came out without his cane.

The bar is small. *Intimate*. Kin sits opposite him, sipping green tea .

“I do not drink,” he explains, and Hermann feels irrationally silly, then defensively determined to enjoy his wine all the more.

“Well, this is lovely,” he says, meaning his drink, which is rich and heady on his tongue and possibly about to go straight to his head.

“Yes,” Kin agrees, his eyes bright in the soft interior, and flicking down to Hermann’s mouth. Hermann’s thigh twitches.

They get through the usual polite enquiries about family, and home. Kin was born in Kyoto, then moved to Tokyo as a child. His sister is an elementary school teacher. His father was killed in Onbiba’s attack on Tokyo, whilst Kin was finishing up his medical training in a hospital that largely escaped any damage, on a placement that should have been at St Barts, in London, but post-2013 the Japanese government had tried to keep all medical staff on their own shores, in a somewhat paranoid move that had turned out to be well-founded.

The fact that he was approved for transfer to Sydney at all attests to his skill as a physician. Hermann is impressed. And warm, in his vest.

He finishes his wine and asks for a sparkling water.

“And, I am also a big fan of 1980s rock music,” Kin chuckles, “which is just a fact of my life. Bon Jovi, Guns N Roses, this kind of thing. ”

“I see,” Hermann replies, momentarily shattered by the realisation that, in the past few years, he has picked up a working knowledge of many more of this genre’s bands than he’d ever wanted to, all through association and forced workspace-sharing with Newton.

“Is that enough information for you, now?” Kin asks, then, making him blink.

“What do you mean?”

“Do I pass the test? I’m not...accustomed to so many questions.” Kin is smiling, though, teasing a little. “My time here is a little limited; I would like to know about *you*.”

“Oh, I see.” He clears his throat, and recounts the standard details of his life, sketching in the background. Kin already knows about his leg, family history and medical state, and his insufferable manchild colleague. He does *not* know that Hermann has terrible siblings, or a love of crisp weather, *not* this oppressive, apparently constant summer, and a predilection for dark chocolate that he cannot quite seem to move past.

Kin asks the correct questions, leading the conversation neatly on, his dark eyes warm. Hermann’s spine relaxes, incrementally, until Kin suggests they walk back to the Shatterdome and puts a hand on his lower back as they leave the bar. The back of Hermann’s neck is damp. He hasn’t been touched like this for months, save for the casual touch of colleagues, from their forced sort of co-habitation. Kin is intelligent, easy-mannered and lovely and, Hermann fears, deep, *deep* inside himself, that he may possibly be a little too dull for his most up to date preferences – but that is *terrible*, and he is working to get past that.

Before the gates Kin pauses, glancing up at the monstrous metallic shape of the Shatterdome for a second.

“May I see you tomorrow?” he asks Hermann.

“Yes.” Hermann answers before he can think about it, looking at the streetlight on Kin’s clean throat and wanting, suddenly, deeply. Kin looks at him, mouth curving again.

“Yes?”

“Yes. Please. I... Would not normally be so forward, but as you have limited time...” He gestures, and Kin laughs.

“It sounds as if I am dying.”

“I would not have said *that*,” Hermann admonishes, but Kin’s chuckle turns into Kin stepping closer to him and putting a hand on his waist, and brushing lips against his jaw, before putting his fingertips on Hermann’s cheekbone and just barely cupping his face.

“May. May I?” he asks, quietly, his eyes on Hermann’s mouth.

Hermann thinks, I don’t want to be *asked*, idiot, and closes the distance himself.

Kin’s mouth is a little dry, but soft, with a lingering taste of his green tea when he parts it for Hermann, tongue tasting his lower lip. They kiss, and he runs the pads of his fingers across Hermann’s cheek and into his hair, and Hermann’s mind goes gloriously *bright*, with his own hands, after momentarily fluttering, unsure where to alight, going for Kin’s sides. He twists fingers

into the fabric of his pullover, gripping, and demands to be *kissed*.

Kin chuckles and does it, tugging them into the shadow against the wall, out of the pool of light, and biting at Hermann's lip when his own shoulders knock into the hastily built concrete fence. Perhaps accidentally. Hermann likes it.

When they break for air, he gasps, a long, deep inhale. Kin snorts, and takes his hand, to kiss his palm.

"Tomorrow?"

'Tomorrow' Kin invites him to the tiny apartment he will soon be vacating, where some of his things are already boxed up, and cooks for him – Kamameshi, better than the ones Hermann had had in Tokyo and fallen deeply for, and a tart orange dessert, after which they snog like teenagers on the sofa until Hermann's head spins. This is ridiculous. *He* is ridiculous. But.

Kin stares at him when Hermann leans over and starts to unbutton his shirt, and then *grins* and helps, shrugging out of it, all beautiful golden skin and a little dark hair on his stomach. He tugs Hermann's shirt up in one go, off over his head, making him pull a face when he emerges that he just *smiles* at, touching Hermann's suddenly pale-looking pectorals, his ribs.

Kin kisses gently, doesn't talk much but to breathe and moan, and follows Hermann to the bedroom with his hands sliding up Hermann's back. He strips the rest of Hermann's clothes slowly, carefully, but when Hermann touches him through his boxers and then hooks them down, he moans, and catches up.

He kisses Hermann's inner thighs until his cock has started twitching every time and he's forgotten to think about his scar in favour of grumbling that Kin hurry *up*, then prepares him thoroughly and – and Hermann hesitates to think it but, thoroughly and a little too *medically*, but it's nice, it's so *good*, it's been so long since he's had anyone's but his own fingers. Kin's lean muscles shift as he shifts up over Hermann, between his splayed knees, to kiss his mouth gently. Wetly. Then a little harder. Then a little *more*, when Hermann bites at his lip and reaches down to grab Kin's slim wrist and urge him for it.

He asks if Hermann is ready, before he pushes inside. Hermann shudders and sobs a little, on his knees now, a pillow under the right one, and just pushes back in answer. His fingers are splayed across the sheets, his head hanging, his spine loose; he doesn't want to talk, he wants— he *wants*—

Kin fucks him wonderfully, deep and steady, and he comes in a messy spurt against his belly, gasping, with very little urging from Kin's fist around his cock and mouth against his ear.

Afterward, collapsed on their backs, Kin half sprawls on Hermann's chest, the top of his head under Hermann's slack jaw. They stare up at the ceiling, panting. Hermann is a little *shocked* at himself. Kin seems to feel the same way; when Hermann stops carding fingers through his hair distractedly, he struggles up onto his elbows and looks over at him.

"Are you okay?" he says, after a moment, his grin a little rueful.

Hermann swallows, feeling the sweat cool on his chest and a slight throb inside him he cannot deny that he's enjoying. "Of— Of course. ... You?"

Kin snickers, softly. "Yes." He rolls and kisses Hermann's throat, making his pulse spike again. "Very much."

The next couple of weeks are a strange, wonderful blur. Hermann refuses to stay at Kin's that night

- nothing so intimate, no. He simply showers and goes home slowly, dazedly. They see each other most evenings after that, though, other than Wednesday, when the holo-screen shorts spectacularly in the afternoon and causes half of the fuses on their side of the lab to blow, for which he blames Newton, whilst Newton blames him, thus leading to them shout at each other about it for an hour before he pushes his sleeves up and fixes his side, and leaves Newton to his.

He'd put in a request for a new one when it started flickering, but been denied. Early *cuts*. Surprise surprise.

He's never had a casual...what is the word to use? *Playmate*? before. There are no promises or lies to tell each other. He likes Kin, and believes that he is respected in return, but they are not hoping for more from each other. The thrill is in the experience, the way Kin and his lean thighs likes to sit on Hermann's lap and work him, the way Hermann's body aches pleasantly, the way his stomach leaps when he receives a message, and the new discovery that he *can* fit two people into his bed in the Shatterdome, when Kin comes to meet him after work at 2am because he hasn't answered any of the messages on his tablet, as he's been lost in an almost finished diagram on his screen for 4.2 hours with his mouth open.

Kin is perhaps less patient, now, because he has nothing else to do but pack and plan for his return to Japan. Hermann has never been a filler for someone's boredom before.

He finds that he does not mind.

Kin follows him quietly back to his room, that night, keeping a cool distance for the night staff that they pass, but running fingers down the inside of Hermann's wrist when the lift doors close, and smiling when Hermann hisses and fists his collar to kiss him.

In his room, Kin sits Hermann down on the edge of his own bed, kneels on the floor and proceeds to *wreck* him utterly, stroking him to hardness and then sucking him until his thighs are trembling. His hands were perhaps already a little shaky from overwork, but the way he slumps back onto the mattress after he's come is entirely due to the *wicked* man's mouth. Though Kin swallows, making him groan, the taste of himself is still there when he is kissed, startling him because his eyes had slid closed.

Kin sheds his clothes, lays down with him and twists their feet together, and pants, breathy, into Hermann's mouth, whilst he thrusts against his groin and into Hermann's sure grip, until he's finished.

It's too late then for him to return, then, so he stays. Hermann insists that he leave before he has to start work, though. The narrow bed is cramped, with them both, but fine.

In the dark, before he falls asleep, Kin rubs Hermann's thigh with the pads of sure fingers, without asking, making Hermann jolt, but he relaxes into it as he drifts off.

When the alarm goes off, the lights come on to half brightness - Hermann had created a programme to make them work to the time he sets a few months before. Kin sits in the covers, rubbing his eyes, as Hermann gets dressed in the soft, flattering light.

"Surely you ought to be *used* to these early starts?" he asks, pausing to survey the doctor yawning in his bed.

"This does not mean that I *like* them," Kin sighs, then gets up.

No-one will be in for another 30 minutes at least, so Hermann lets Kin walk with him to the lab, no

sound but his cane against the floor.

“Saturday?” he asks, in the empty corridor outside the enormous doors. Saturday will be his last night before he flies.

Hermann nods. “Yes. Please.”

Kin grins, and moves in to grab a kiss, even though they’re *here*, his hands on Hermann’s hips. His fingertips slip knowledgeably underneath Hermann’s jumper to touch skin; Hermann feels himself *smile* against Kin’s mouth and cups his face with his free hand, then grips his hair a little too hard to admonish, before pulling away.

This is when he notices Newton, over Kin’s shoulder, where he has come through the door from the stairwell that he apparently loves to use, now, because he is a sneaky little— He’s paused mid-step as the door closes, slowly, behind him, a coffee in one hand and a steaming pot of noodles in the other, and his mouth open.

Hermann jerks so hard he hit Kin in the ankle with his cane.

“Shiiiiit,” Newton says, and turns around abruptly to hook the door with his foot and shove it open enough that he can dart back through it, immediately.

Hermann stares, horrified, as it closes. Clicks.

“...You should try to make a joke about this.”

He spins to gape at Kin, who winces at his face, but then shrugs. It takes him a couple more seconds before he can sputter any *sound*, yanking his jumper straight again as he takes a breath.

“I—” He is most definitely blushing, horribly. “I am going to work now.”

“Okay.” Kin bites his bottom lip, obviously trying not to grin. Hermann does *not* see how this is funny; Newton will probably tell everyone in the entire PPDC that he’s— or, no, he won’t need to, he’ll simply tell Harold and then everyone in the *world* will know within a day—

“Hey. Everything is well,” Kin murmurs, putting a hand on his arm and making him pause. He looks at him desperately. Is it? *Is* it?

“You worry too much about things,” Kin adds, eyes fond. Hermann rolls his own.

“I’m—” He takes a deep, quick breath again, then sighs. “I’m fine. Thank you. I will see you.” He kisses his cheek, as an afterthought, very briefly; Kin squeezes his arm, and then watches him stride on into the lab.

He hooks his cane on his desk, and sits down for a moment. His legs are wobbling. He also resists the urge to headbutt his console, but only just.

Newton comes in 16.2 minutes later, whistling jarringly. Hermann’s chalk squeaks against the blackboard and he turns, carefully, to watch Newton put his things down, blow on his fingertips even though his noodles are no longer steaming, take a quick sip of coffee, and then turn to face Hermann square on, with his grin fixed and huge.

A pause.

“So, Hermann...” Newton waggles his eyebrows. “How’s it going?”

He sighs, eyes closing briefly. “*Please* do not lower yourself to *this* sort of behaviour.”

“What?” Newton tucks his thumbs into the back pockets of his jeans, crossing over towards Hermann, his steps exaggeratedly big and relaxed. “Just a little stunned, you know, just a *casual* Thursday morning with you macking on—”

“Newton!”

He laughs, high. “*Dude*. Calm the fuck down. What’s the big deal? You’ve engaged in some normal human behaviour, for once. Good for you.”

“Charming.”

“I’m *also* pretty impressed.” Newton leans back on his elbows against Hermann’s desk chair, crossing his legs, whilst Hermann stares at him over the top of his glasses. He gets an odd, encouraging sort of smile from Newton, and narrows his eyes. “Hermann. Dude. A *doctor*.”

No, he will not blush; what he will do is glare. “Once again it escapes your attention or respect that *I* am a doctor.” And so are *you*, he thinks. This is uncomfortable.

“Yeah but not like *that*. Though, you know, a medical degree’s not really *that* impressive, I mean I’ve—” He stops, licks his bottom lip, and then just *giggles*.

Hermann eyes him, warily. This is uncomfortable *and* odd.

“Do shut up,” he says, which seems like the best answer, then turns away before Newton can spot the heat that he’s sure is spreading up his neck, from underneath his collar. Newton just laughs some more.

“No problem, buddy.”

Contrary to his expectations, though, Newton does *not* tell anyone. Most particularly, neither Harold, nor Jessie. Hermann relaxes slowly, tension popping down his vertebrae, and his shoulders finally dropping by the afternoon. No messages full of punctuation or bellowing phone calls come through from Dietrich, either, so Newton can’t even have informed his ‘favourite Gottlieb’ by email.

The rest of the day just goes on as normal – or as normal as passes for so, in their lives.

Hermann gives Newton a nod when he leaves the lab, to acknowledge this, and Newton, body bumping along distractedly to some more of the very loud, somewhat *violent* music he’s been subjecting them to all day, throws him a vague salute.

On Saturday, there are no tearful goodbyes with Kin. He takes every one of Hermann’s thrusts, hunched over the kitchen counter, with a breathy groan, then kisses Hermann sweetly afterward, the two of them sprawled on the sticky linoleum of the floor.

All of the furniture save the stripped bed has gone. He’d had to throw the condom into an open rubbish bag, the only thing left, with a look of distaste that Kin just chuckled at.

“Your flat looks rather depressing, this way,” he points out, now, sitting back against the cupboards with his legs in front of him. Kin’s hair is a fright and his own must be worse, he thinks, watching him rooting through the freezer. Hermann takes in the sight of his skin, his gorgeous, golden buttocks, to remember it, because he *can* – and then makes a noise, right from his throat, because he emerges holding a tub of ice cream, triumphantly.

“I *thought* I had this left in here.”

They eat it on the floor, with plastic spoons, and Hermann keeps laughing, softly, to himself.

“So. Look after yourself, please?” Kin says, when he’s about to go, smoothing his palms down Hermann’s shirt front and then tugging one of his beltloops when he scowls.

“Yes. Of course.”

“Keep up with the stretches.”

Hermann raises an eyebrow. “The more you remind me that you were once my doctor, the more sordid this becomes...”

“You enjoy that, secretly.”

He splutters, and Kin laughs at him, and kisses him goodbye.

“Have a safe flight,” he says, begrudging, and Kin’s eyes crinkle.

A few weeks later, he finally pours himself a scotch from the bottle in his bottom drawer, and reads the attachment to Kin’s original email. A few google searches later, there it is: a medical publication date of late 2011 in front of him, about a radical new regenerative technique that’s been pioneered in Massachusetts, and Newton’s name.

He was right.

Hermann’s doctors in Munich *had* made use of that work, in his knee surgery.

He cannot *quantify* exactly how he feels about this.

The next day, he brings Newton a coffee, laying two fingers on the back of his wrist to get his attention.

“Hey.” Newton blinks, then beams up at him, beautifully. The shadows under his eyes are dark but his face has gone bright, surprised. “Thanks, man. I was about to get up for one.”

Hermann knows, because he’s been watching Newton all morning, sideways, trying to think how to approach *this*. He smiles a little back, instead.

“You’re...welcome.”

A couple of weeks later still, there is a knock on Hermann’s door not five minutes after he’s got back to it, sitting on his bed to unlace his shoes.

Frowning, he swings himself up onto his feet and limps over to look through the peephole. Newton is outside, only his profile backlit as he looks down the corridor with his sunglasses on his head, almost lost in his mess of hair.

Hermann spins the handle and pulls open his door. “Are you lost?”

Whatever Newton was *going* to say veers smoothly into an insult. “I’m— *ruuude* – no, I’m hungry. So.” He points. “You, me, burger. Plan?”

Hermann feels his eyebrows lift, unbidden. “Of all the options in this godforsaken city, you come to me with *burger*?”

“Don’t complain too early,” Newton replies, folding his arms over his t-shirt. It’s the dancing skeletons one that gives Hermann an immediate headache. “I’ve got a recommendation from Jessie for a place where you can draw all over everything.” He grins, here, whilst Hermann is struck with horror. “Yeah, *seriously*. Napkins, menu, the placemats. Apparently even the walls aren’t off limits, if you get struck with ‘divine inspiration’.” He uses finger quotes, here, and Hermann wants to kick him squarely in the groin.

“...And you thought this would appeal to me.”

“No, I thought you’d want to commit arson, but it’d be entertaining. But, you also ran out of whiteboards today and I know sometimes a different way of framing your diagrams works for you, so...” He shrugs, then fixes Hermann with his particular gaze, face open. “Wanna come doodle on some walls with me?”

“...I doubt I’m going to have a breakthrough in a themed restaurant,” Hermann says, but his voice comes out strangely *punched* and soft, after a pause in which he is peculiarly touched by Newton’s observation.

Newton just grins wider, likely because he knows that that is not a *no*. “Okay, dude, but if nothing else you get to spend an hour verbally destroying their décor choices, so...” He does a weighing options gesture here, physically balancing scales in the air.

Hermann’s lips twitch.

He *is* hungry. And entirely bored of staring at the same 4 square metres of laboratory.

“You raise an excellent point,” he concedes.

“I am *full* of excellent points.”

No. However. “Surely you might, ah...wish to take Jessie, with you, no?”

Newton’s expression ripples, his eyes flicking down. “Oh. Yeah. That. Uh...” He scratches the back of his neck. “I fucked up there. Um. That’s not a thing anymore. We’re friends though! It’s cool. All cool. Really,” he adds, when Hermann looks at him for a little longer. “All’s well that ends abruptly. She’s too good for me, anyhow.” He grins, and Hermann *hmm*s, considering it.

“...All right, then. Let’s go.”

He checks that his keycard is attached to his vest, which it is, and re-does up the top button of his shirt, pulling the door shut, whilst Newton bounces on the balls of his feet.

In May, another kaiju attacks, near Seattle. In September, he works up his clearest image of the Breach after four solid days of work, though his hands are juddering so much after his hurried presentation to the Marshall and her other global peers, whilst the rest of his team peer through the doorway of the conference room to watch, that his fingers knock against his forehead when he tries to salute.

Newton takes him by the wrist when he exits, and essentially drags him back to his room, prods him inside, and threatens to drug his tea if he returns to the lab within 24 hours.

Hermann then has to repeat this action a few weeks later, when Newton isolates a particular vulnerability in the joints of two older bone-samples from different kaiju but sharing the malfunction, and is flown in a rush to Hong Kong, and then back again, with no rest, in the space of 2 and a half days.

Destruction is moved to an even higher priority. Harold brings in a stuffed kangaroo that he finds in a second hand shop and mounts it on top of the luminous tanks with the partial kaiju lung in it, the same one that Hermann is convinced twitches occasionally. Jessie nicknames it 'Kick me' and Newton laughs far too hard at that. He also begins organising his flesh samples in a pattern from 'bumpy' to 'awesome', and buys 10,000 bright pink plastic gloves from Beijing on Ebay one particularly twitchy early morning, which he then *delights* in wearing, at every opportunity, particularly when the Marshall comes to check in on them.

In October, 'Ceramander' emerges and has a good go at Hawaii, before being destroyed by a combination of the Hansens' brute force in Striker Eureka, and the newly re-assigned Coyote Tango. Hermann knows that Pentecost is no longer in it, and though it is the same machine, now repaired after its last battle in Tokyo, he still feels that it somehow lacks a *finesse*, in its movement.

Newton disagrees with him, but Newton only really has eyes on the *kaiju*, so.

By the end of the year, Bastien's put in for a job with the official Press office of the PPDC, to go out and report from the front line, and been turned down. Hermann sees his Father's protective, slightly patronising influence there, but will not complain that his little brother is remaining relatively safe in London. Whereas Bastien does, at length, for *hours*.

What else, what else... The numbers in his mind keep *changing* on Hermann, leading him to veer from doubt to clarity, most unpredictably. Dietrich is going to ask Vanessa to marry him, a future event that Hermann had anticipated, but dreaded, and wanted, all at the same time. Along with these confusing, mixed emotions, has come a newly philosophical point of view on how much he now misses regular, satisfying sex without the complexities of real *desire*, and feels disgust at this, and at the fact that Newton somehow manages to make him snort with laughter three times in one month.

It's possible that the world really is ending.

They *need* to destroy the Breach.

Hermann also accepts that, probably, he is going to have to be the one to do so, as everyone else in the PPDC still seems to think an optimistically vague bombing every now and then will do the trick.

Sigh.

"Once more unto the Breach, dear friends, once more..." Newton recites at him one morning, grinning, stretching back in his chair until his elbows click.

Hermann purses his lips, but he agrees.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Translations

überholt - outdated

...so I didn't have to see dein spitzen, mürrisches Gesicht—" - "your pointy, grumpy face"

zum Teufel - what the deuce?

Ich muss mal eine rauchen gehen," - "I'm going for a cigarette."

Ich weiß, ich weiß. Ich habe aufgehört." - "I know, I know. I *have* quit."

Also.

I AM

THE MOST

RIDICULOUS

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm *sorry*, this one is a beast...

[2022]

That might have been Hermann's second Christmas whilst being hot, a little sticky, and pining somewhat for decorations that actually *fit* a situation instead of clashing horribly with the blue skies and sunshine, but he is no more accustomed to it.

Newton and Harold had both flown home, citing it potentially the last time they'd be able to, for a while, what with all the cuts that had begun. Hermann, eyeing his salary, agrees. None of them are there for the money, of course, but there's no doubt that it helps. As and when they defeat the kaiju he would *like* to have an actual life to return to.

Jessie stays, but there's no great surprise - she spends the day with her family in Sydney. Hermann decides to have a quiet one, using the almost deserted Shatterdome to get some decent work done. Everyone else in the place seems miserable to be working, but he loses himself in the equations and the day passes wonderfully.

Dietrich and Vanessa Skype him, fairly drunk, the next morning, to announce their engagement. Expected though it was, it still hits him with a sort of stunned giddiness that it has really *happened*. He's happy, though, and happy to *listen*, up until Dietrich gets teary and Vanessa laughs at him, but her eyes look suspiciously watery too, at which point Hermann suggests that he need to get back to work.

Kin also emails, to wish him happiness for the new year, and he smiles at that, too. Then allows himself to recall *details*, and gets a frustrating little *pull* in his gut, a need for something physical.

He goes to the gym.

The very end of January brings something that hasn't happened in Australia for a time: a kaiju makes land in Melbourne, getting into the city easily through the only partially completed Wall.

This one is called ‘Spinejackal’, and not without reason - its vertebrae protrude brutally as it climbs and crushes. Newton begins scribbling in a notepad the second he sees the feeds, sketching and hypothesising on spinal cord, cartilage, ligament structure. His notes and diagrams are fascinating, Hermann must admit, peering at them sideways.

It’s not the first time that a country they’ve been in, or a landmass that they’ve been *on*, has been attacked, nor is Australia anywhere near as small as Japan – although they had *left* by the time Osaka was hit – but, somehow, it all feels *extremely* close to home.

Out roll the Hansens, their first deployment alone, working to overpower the kaiju by themselves. Hermann, watching the data, thinks again on whether Hansen the younger – Charles, he thinks, calling himself *Chuck* from what he’d overheard in the mess, once, how desperately *inane* – is more than 21. Surely not?

He frowns at the screens in LOCCENT, where by some unspoken rule a hodge-podge mixture of techs, engineers, scientists, programmers, analysts and more have bypassed the clearance technicalities and rushed up there to watch. Newton and he had gotten there first, of course. Well. Newton had barged, whilst Hermann had loped in a second behind, far more subtly.

“Home turf,” Newton had said, in explanation to the tech who tried to pull rank and tell them to leave, whilst snagging two vacant chairs for them both.

Now, though they *had* had a corner to themselves, things have become fairly tight. Two of Striker Eureka’s engineers come skidding in, breathless, and the press of people around the screens moves closer. Suddenly, sitting is no longer particularly viable or fair.

They glance at each other. Hermann raises his eyebrows, and Newton tilts his head both ways to say *yeah yeah*, and they begrudgingly both get up, tucking the chairs back underneath the console and shuffling closer to lean on them. The space behind them is filled immediately. An engineer climbs up onto the console behind them and his boots knock Newton forward; Newton puts his hands out to catch himself, one on the chair and another on Hermann’s lower back as he stumbles, with a small yelp.

“*Shit!* Sorry, dude.” Newton takes a second to glance at Hermann on his way to spinning, fully, to glare at the tech – standing up on the metal to look over the crowd and do nothing but shrug at Newton. Whose hand is still on Herman’s back. *Warm*. He takes it away when he swears at the tech, though oddly good-naturedly, grinning even as he retracts his middle finger, and turns back.

Hermann stares forward, at the data, but he leans his weight a little to the left, after a second, toward Newton, as the battle continues onscreen - so that he can flex and then relax his leg. He’s happy to have been in the corner again, nothing next to him but the wall. He does not enjoy being bumped or shuffled about, fairly touch-starved though he may feel, on occasion, now.

Kin may have been a bad idea.

A wonderful, bad idea.

Striker Eureka takes down the kaiju after 3.2 hours and the room erupts into cheers. People pound their feet on the floor on the work surfaces, high fives are thrown. What he’s certain must be Jessie’s catcall comes from somewhere in the crowd, someone else whistles, and behind him, a young tech covers his face with his hands and starts crying. *Melbourne lad*, someone else whispers.

Ah.

Harold gets a hug from a lithe engineer in a grease-stained overall and looks extremely pleased, before pausing a second and then hugging her again, obviously sensing an opportunity. Meanwhile Newton sighs a little, part relief, part disappointment, just like always, and throws Hermann a look. He nods back, and they move, working through the throng of people slowly, so that they can head back to the lab and start work once more, leaving Jessie and Harold to mingle.

As they get through the door, a number of people start to break out into song.

Newton pauses at that, his eyes widening, one foot hovering mid-step.

“No,” Hermann says, under his breath, continuing to walk.

After a second, Newton follows. “You know I’ll just sing in the lab instead,” he says, drawing level.

Yes. “Oh, *joy*.”

He does. Hermann knows that he is motivated by the events, of course – he feels the same. Ready to work, to use more data, stirred up and his hands itching for the chalk - but for Newton it is a mixture of sadness and excitement, the anticipation of more samples but the frustration that there won’t be enough, nor anything alive for him to play with. Hermann *also* knows that no matter *how* many times he requests it, Newton will continue to play music and bounce around all afternoon, jumping from one thing to the next, occasionally maudlin, occasionally jubilant, and always brilliant, furious. Always so frustrating that Hermann wants to knock him out with a book, just to stop the running soundtrack alongside everything coming from the speakers.

Rock music with Newton singing along, however, is not the *worst* thing that Hermann can imagine. He simply pulls a pair of earplugs out of the packet he keeps in his top drawer and uses them to block out the worst.

Working, working, working. The next few months pass in a blur of this.

Things continue much the same in the lab, with the obvious absence of the previous relationship between Newton and Jessie, whatever exactly the parameters of that had been – upon which Hermann can now say that he has a slightly different, more *personally* educated perspective.

Everything does seem fine between them, genuinely. Hermann cannot pick up on any awkwardness, at least. He’d watched them a handful of times last year, after Newton had told him they were ‘done’, for lack of a better word, and seen nothing to suggest a falling out or argument.

Jessie continues to code speedily, though she spends more time out of the lab than in, now, often called to work in engineering or LOCCENT instead. She also continues to tell awful jokes with no shame, to poke Newton in the ribs when she is there, and to make Hermann green tea whenever she makes her own cups of chamomile, if she’s there long enough to stop for a drink.

He *had* noticed Newton watching her, once, just before Christmas, on a line to Anchorage whilst she relayed some coding to someone there. There may have been a hint of...wistfulness, perhaps, in the expression on Newton’s face. Hermann had not been able to form a full opinion - it was but a brief look, before Newton rubbed the back of his neck and turned back to his screen unexpectedly and Hermann, sorting through a cabinet to find more cable ties, had needed to move as well, managing to hit his elbow on the door as he did.

His current focus, then, is pinning down a more *exact* shape of the space through which the kaiju enter and finding its weaknesses. Which he *could* point out is something like a gravitational vortex,

underwater, some days, impossible as that is, through grainy relayed images and sonar and hypothesis and also somehow having to invert a large chunk of the most basic things he'd learned as a child, but he will not, because no one will *listen*. This is only step one, anyway, and even *this* task is something similar to looking through a rapidly spinning kaleidoscope, though nowhere near as pleasing.

Hermann had *liked* kaleidoscopes, as a child.

Not anymore.

So, all of his attention is fixed on finding the way in. He is the man outside the maze, tapping at walls to see which are hollow, and—

Oh, for goodness' *sake*.

He leans away from the blackboard for a moment to rub his forehead, and closes his eyes, the risk of doing so halfway up a stepladder be damned. These trains of thought are *Newton's* influence. The little nuisance does have this bizarre need to find metaphors for *everything*.

On Hermann's 30th, somewhere between the bar and the beach, part of the incessant chatter reaching his ears as they wobbled along the pavement and the construction site toward the sea had been that Newton reckoned they were like nuclear fusion. *Hear me out*, he'd said, when Hermann recalls turning to him, as they'd bumped down from curb to the sand, with an utterly perplexed but (he's sure) impressively *sceptical* expression. Before he'd sat down abruptly, upon deciding that he needed to unlace his shoes. *We join together, and then—boom!* Newton had clapped, the sound echoing across the beach. *The world can't handle us, my man! We can fuck it up! **Destroy** all their preconceived notions and...shit!*

He doesn't remember exactly what he'd said afterward, nor how Newton had ended up in the water, but he knows that he must disagree now. He hopes that he did then. They're *fission*, not fusion. Absolutely, yes. He has come to realise that he will need Newton for this, that perhaps Newton is the best person to work alongside, doing what he does whilst Hermann covers his own field, with the aim of breaking the problem down together. He will cover the Breach, and Newton the kaiju that come through it. Splitting it up into smaller parts; to bombard the problem until it can be solved. Find the vulnerabilities of the Breach *and* the beasts.

It's not a perfect metaphor, no. He won't be sharing it, so what does it matter. *He* is not one for poetic feelings about his work.

He glances surreptitiously down, then, to the messy, tumultuous top of Newton's head, bent over his microscope. He's got the pink gloves on again, idiot—

— and, across from him, Harold is also wearing them as he mixes chemicals.

Hermann's lips twitch. He looks back to his boards quickly.

In April, he receives an email from Father, informing him that he will be based in Los Angeles Shatterdome for a time, overseeing the construction of the Wall there, which is further on than the other sections. The thought of Father in LA is amusing enough to make him smirk at his computer.

A scientist in the Panama City Shatterdome contacts him not long after, asking for some of the original sections from his first jaeger coding, back in 2016. Hermann questions why – that location's main function is to protect the shipping routes, not to target *his* area of expertise, not to mention that the PPDC uses a central database and all of his work can be accessed almost

constantly, as can anyone's - but the Jaeger science team there have a theory regarding mass that they want to test out. Hermann sighs, then goes through his older files and sends it over, in any case.

It's nice, to think about Jaegers again. *Machinery* and mathematics. He goes back to considering the Breach again in July, however, when 'Taurax' attacks Mindanao, ramming buildings and sending the population there even further inland, before flattening any of those who'd remained by the beaches. It's the closest attack to the Breach location there has been, for a while. It *is* one of the most vulnerable places.

Hermann vows to redouble his efforts, turning the footage off.

Focussing. *Focus*. Understanding and destroying. He'd never dreamed of being renowned for destroying something, unless one counts old unknowns or misbeliefs. He'd wished to *solve*, to create, to engineer and build knowledge. Never would he have put himself in this lab, this constantly exasperating but exciting situation: alien monsters, constant sunshine, perpetually smothered lust for a genius manchild that has somehow wormed his way into being Hermann's most frustrating *and* satisfying colleague, and friend, with a trail of gifted lab partners behind and (probably) ahead of them. The path to, ultimately, Breach destruction.

As life goals go, it is *not* what he might have expected. What he *had*, as a younger man? Had varied from time to time but generally always included:

- Mapping the poly-edged shapes in his mind properly, possibly through a computer programme that does not yet exist, so that others can see and then *understand his perspective* – because he's tired of trying to explain himself
- Solving one of the (five remaining) Millenium Prize problems, of *course*, but moreover
- Determining solitary numbers, a pet project of his
- Finding the next prime, and/or the meaning, the true *meaning* of their place in the world
- Since he is *reaching* a little, then, yes - it would be nice to find some way of developing the technology for building barrier force-fields, solely in order to *shut Bastien up*, since he's been talking about it since Hermann won his first science prize at 12, right about when Bastien had started reading comics, and it's gotten rather silly, now
 - (Additionally, perhaps, developing that technology further into the creation of a personal, portable generator, so that no-one on a subway train *ever* has to be pressed up against again?)
- And not to mention, of course, discovering the key to rendering *Newton* utterly speechless.

It's a topic he's given some thought, over the past 6 years. Most scenarios involve more than a little violence. Too much cough mixture in the aloe-vera drinks he can't get so easily anymore. Gagging him with a pair of those bloody gloves. Shocking him with an example of Hermann's own staggering capability would be nice, but Newton has *no* respect for the complexities of mathematics. Perhaps drowning him in one of his sample tanks? Alternatively, pressing his forehead to the nape of Newton's neck and the edges of the tattoos that now cover almost the entirety of his shoulders as he presses into him, pushes in so slowly, over a surface (in their lab?) with his hands tight on Newton's hips, that Newton can do nothing but shudder and gasp, and push back?

Yes.

Yes, Kin absolutely *was* a bad idea.

Two weeks of...enjoying himself, and Hermann feels like a pre-pubescent again. He mentally pulls himself together, then wipes the mental blackboards clean again.

Pay *attention*.

At least he has the presence of mind to only allow himself a *physical* digression with Newton in his thoughts once a year. He had already used that up, however, on the 4th of January.

One afternoon in August, Newton wanders dazedly back into the lab after a break and sits, heavily, at his workstation. There's a large chunk of artificially preserved purplish flesh from Taurax there that he looks as though he would like to face-plant into. Said face-planting *might* have been a thing that Hermann wished for, once, daily, but now it tends to be more along the lines of *monthly*, instead, and today he's feeling benevolent enough to be concerned.

Harold's still out, eating lunch, goodness knows *where*, Jessie's with the engineers again, and Newton looks rather odd.

"Are you ill?"

"...Huh?"

"You've gone a fairly interesting colour. By which I mean you *lack* any." He gets up, realising that he hasn't stood up for four hours when his knee clicks, and crosses over to Newton. Leaning in to examine him reveals something more. "You also seem to be perspiring."

That seems to reach his lab partner, who pauses whilst taking his glasses off to pull a face at him. "'Perspiring'?"

"Yes, it is a *word*. Apologies if the syllable count is too high for you. What's the *matter*?"

Newton groans, unattractively, throwing his glasses onto his desk. "I'm...so old."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm *old*," Newton repeats, then covers his face with his hands, and whines into them.

Hermann remains fairly unimpressed by his dramatics, after this long. He purses his lips. "*Do* clarify, if you would."

"My—" Newton stops, takes a big breath, and looks at him. "Hanna, my cousin? She's pregnant."

"...Oh." He puts his hands in his pockets, and leans against the desk carefully, eying Newton. "Well. *Mazel tov*, then."

"No, no," Newton says, holding up a finger. "No *maz* and no *tov*. My hands are actually shaking here. She can't have a baby. *She's* a baby."

"I understood that she'd finished university some time ago?"

"So not the point."

"It's fairly relevant."

Newton snorts again, and sighs, reaching for his glasses and putting them back on. He is silent for nine seconds, then, staring off through the frames into the middle-distance before unexpectedly he seems to relax, all of the colour rushing back into his face. "Holy shit. Hanna's *pregnant*."

"Repetition, now. Did you somehow manage to *injure* yourself on the way h—"

He isn't able to finish, because Newton suddenly slams both hands down on the work-surface, narrowly missing squelching into a spinal cavity, leaps out of his seat and grabs Hermann by the upper arms, his face ecstatic. "She's having a *kid*!"

Hermann blinks. He's never had this much *Newton* this close to his face, before, except during arguments. His eyes take in the familiar pattern of freckles as always, without him really *meaning* to; apophenia has always been a problem of his.

"You're holding me rather *tightly*," he says, after a beat.

Newton lets go immediately. "Fuck, sorry." He takes a step back, but his grin remains stunned, bright. "Hermann! *Hermann*. Holy fucking *shit*."

"Yes, yes, the miracle of life." He rolls his shoulders. Enough people on the planet are having babies, still, it cannot be that amazing, but there Newton goes, *dancing*, excited, hips one way, then the other. "...Are there no children in your family, yet?"

"Nope. First one." Newton takes another deep breath, then shakes his head. "Man. I feel *weird*. This is great."

"That will pass," he says, thinking of his cousin's two sons running riot around the church cemetery at Karla's wedding, skidding on the dew-damp grass. Well, no - begrudgingly he could admit that the younger one, Oliver, chattering away in Welsh was rather sweet, even if he couldn't understand it.

Lord help him when *Karla* decides she wants children.

Newton just grins at him. Apropos of something only he would be able to explain, his look turns far too knowing. "You just wait until Dietrich and Vanessa get *procreative*," he says, and winks.

Hermann is not sure how he feels about that, yet, actually.

"How you can be 'old' when you still act like a toddler escapes me," he replies.

Newton claps him on the arm, smirking, and manages to get on with his work for the rest of the day, even if he does occasionally stop to stare off at nothing.

In September, 'Tentalus' bursts out into the sea near China, moving so quickly with its octopus-like appendages *and* limbs that one moment it's in the East sea, the next in the South. Crimson Typhoon, the Jaeger from the Hong Kong Shatterdome that Hermann has now learnt has triplets piloting it, meets it there.

Whilst updating himself on the current state of the Jaeger programme, previously, he'd discovered that these three brothers have been instrumental in orchestrating a number of updates and revolutionary modifications to their Jaeger, for which he admires them greatly.

Not to mention, the concept of *triplets* piloting is extraordinary. Hermann, watching them, briefly considers the neural power multiplied by the jaeger force and velocity, the energy produced versus mass, and sees stars.

His mother's next email regarding the kaiju brings him abruptly back to appalling reality.

"Oh *no*," he says aloud, dismayed, reading it at the end of the day.

Newton is pottering in the corner, kicking drawers shut before leaving, turning off lights. He looks

over whilst shoving a paperback into the back pocket of his jeans.

“What?”

“My...” He turns to look across the lab with judgement. “My mother says that she found the last kaiju vaguely reminiscent of Cthulhu, and wonders what meaning this could have.”

Newton blinks, then laughs so hard that he has to lean on one of his sample tanks to catch his breath. “Oh my *god*,” he wheezes, the yellowish water highlighting his face, “that’s *perfect*. Please *please* give me her email address.”

“Not even if I *die* will you ever have permission to converse with my mother,” Hermann repeats, *again*, beginning to type his reply.

At the end of November, a Friday evening, he is having a discussion regarding the standards of the shower units with the head of the cleaning team, whom he has spotted in the corridor, whom has been *ignoring* his emails for a whole month, and whom is also most definitely *not* giving Hermann the precise attention that something of this delicacy deserves - when someone pokes him in the back of the head, right where he’s recently had his hair re-cut.

He spins, outraged, to see Vanessa and Dietrich.

Standing in the corridor.

Cackling at him when he stumbles backward in shock, saving himself by fumbling with his cane.

They are impossibly tall and grinning and *there*, in Sydney. Vanessa’s wearing long jeans and a t-shirt, enormous sunglasses in her hair and a large wheeled suitcase behind her. Dietrich’s got another bag on his back, a t-shirt with *C’est ne pas une pipe* on the front, and is possibly teary *already*, behind those glasses, Lord knows *why*.

Hermann gapes at them.

“We got married! *Surprise!*” Vanessa yells, and then he *chokes*.

Dietrich frowns at him as he tries to speak, and fails. “Ness. Don’t kill him, please.”

“Wh— *Was?*” he gets out, slipping into German in his shock, heart still pounding.

Vanessa’s smile softens. “Sorry, Hermann.” She darts forward and wraps her arms around him, and he blinks at Dietrich over her shoulder, through her curls.

Kevin, the cleaner, takes the opportunity to sneak past them, the outrageous *plebian*. Hermann decides to chase that up later.

“You *got married?*” he repeats, quietly. Dietrich, watching them, nods as if to answer him. Hermann brings his arms around Vanessa after a second, realising that he hadn’t, but his mind is spinning, looping away. They’ve gotten married, without him.

Vanessa *squeezes* him, then, kissing his temple and leaning back to look him in the face. “We...” She bites her lip. “Look. We waited, and planned, and then it got so bloody complicated - it’s so hard to organise anything now, and everyone wanted to come over, and no-one could, it seemed strange to have something as big as everyone else wanted, and...” She sighs, grins, waves her hands around as if that will help to explain. “I didn’t want to be the *model* getting married, I just wanted it to be *me*, and him. So we went to the registry office.”

Stepping in, Dietrich puts a hand on her shoulder as she moves back from Hermann, carefully, watching him. “Three days ago,” she finishes, at his unspoken question.

“Our witnesses were strangers, so we didn’t play favourites,” Dietrich adds.

Hermann, still reeling, hooks his cane over his forearm so that he can fold his arms, to gain a moment. He glares at the two of them. His legs feel uneven. “How *reassuring*.”

Dietrich chuckles, leans in to clap a hand on the back of his neck and kiss him on the nose. His moustache is *awful*. Hermann jerks away. “But that’s why we’re *here*, Bruder.”

“Party!” Vanessa clarifies. “Karla and Max and Bastien are coming, too, their flight lands a bit later than ours. We wanted to tell you ourselves.”

“I... Your brothers?” he asks Vanessa, confused.

She shakes her head. “No one could get any time off work. Probably a good thing. My mum hasn’t stopped *shouting* since we told them.”

“This is our avoidance technique,” Dietrich says, pleased with himself at his cleverness.

Hermann rolls his eyes, but then takes in the sight of them both, staring at him, Dietrich’s hand on Vanessa’s shoulder, her teeth back in her lip. They’re waiting for his response, he realises. Anxiously. In truth he does not know *what* to say.

“...Congratulations.” He shakes his head in wonder, then unfolds his arms a little. “I’m truly happy for you—”

Dietrich takes that as enough invitation to hug him so fiercely that he practically picks him *up*. Hermann has to smack him sharply on the back of the head to make him let go.

They drag him out of work immediately, not even letting him return to the lab, or to change, or to *wash*. Dietrich wheels the case, but Hermann insists on taking the other bag he has, and manages with little difficulty. The streets are very flat; this is *one* thing that Sydney has going for it.

Over supper – something small for him, though with a vodka, a huge meal for his brother and new *sister-in-law* – they tell him about the plans for the next night. He can’t stop looking at the ring on Dietrich’s large hand, Vanessa’s smile. They’ve booked a table in a bar nearby that they’d found online, and they want everyone to dress as if it’s their real reception.

“It’ll just be a few of us, but a proper knees-up, we hope.” Vanessa slurps her drink through the striped straw, her eyes bright.

“We also sent an email inviting your colleagues, though, don’t forget that,” Dietrich casually throws in, dunking a chip in too much ketchup.

Hermann flinches. “*What?*” He glances over his shoulder as if Newton will stride in immediately, and slides a little deeper into the ridiculous red leather bench-seat Vanessa insisted they procure. “*Why*. Have you invited. *My colleagues?*”

Dietrich smirks whilst chewing, his cheek bulging. “Curiosity. Also, Newton’s my friend.”

“You email *occasionally!*”

“We’ve also *met* each other, which is crucial.”

“Which I still *haven’t*,” Vanessa chimes in. “You’ve worked with him for what, six years now? When do I get to meet your *friennnd*, Herman?” she sing-songs, pouting.

Dietrich huffs with laughter, and brushes the back of his knuckles along her cheek. Hermann stares at them as they grin at each other. Dietrich is *still* chewing, and they are *giddy*.

“...This is horrible.” He downs his drink.

“That’s weddings and thirtieth birthdays for you,” Vanessa says, turning back to laugh *at* him. “And everyone here knows what *you* did on your thirtieth.” Her smile just stretches when he glowers at her, though probably unnecessarily, because she has no shame.

“Still very proud of you for getting smashed on a beach, by the way.” His brother’s grin is somehow more encouraging.

Hermann wonders briefly what he would feel about him having rather energetically, and repeatedly, slept with his ex-doctor. Neither of them know *that* one, proving Newton’s surprisingly loyalty, and ability to keep his secrets for him, once again.

He sniffs, instead. “Thank you,” is the best answer he can come up with, for the time being.

“Much better than my thirtieth,” Vanessa continues, stealing a chip from Dietrich’s plate. “I ate a whole bag of birds-eye chicken dippers, over-plucked my eyebrows, and cried over baby video clips of my brothers.”

“Ja?” Dietrich turns to her, surprised. She nods.

“Yup. But then I got over it. And then your flowers arrived,” she finishes, nodding at Hermann. “Thank you for last month’s, too.”

He dabs his mouth with a napkin. “You’re very welcome.”

He has the next day free, which means that he has the entirety of it to worry about the evening. He avoids the lab, of course. He avoids the Mess. He cannot *believe* that they got married without him. He tries to read and finds his knee bouncing like Newton’s, from whom he half expects a message to come through at any moment, riddled with grammatical errors and a sense of smug amusement and no propriety.

He does his physio until his thigh muscle burns, then showers to relax it again, and after 12 minutes ignoring it he *has* to wrap a hand around himself in the luke-warm water— afternoon showers are never a good idea, all of the heat having been used up in the morning, now – whilst bracing his other against the wall, head bowed, just to relieve *something*.

Bastien calls him in the early afternoon, his voice still croaky with fatigue.

“This hotel is great, but überholt,” he yawns down the phone. “The curtains are older than *me*.”

“Yes, Australians often lack basic taste.” He combs his hair in the mirror over his sink, with his brother on speakerphone. “You’ll come to see this.”

“I’m picking that up quickly, actually. I quite like it. Sort of honest, in its way. Maybe I’ll *stay*.”

Hermann pauses, in horror, then changes the subject. “Can *you* believe that they’ve gotten married without us?” He’s so *stunned*, though perhaps he shouldn’t have been; he hasn’t spoken to them as frequently, recently. Still, he does not generally *like* surprises, much as he might make an exception

for family.

Bastien laughs, once. “*Oh*, ja. Definitely.”

“Don’t be disgusting,” he snaps, “she’s our sister now.”

“I didn’t mean that!” Bastien sounds genuinely hurt, which he turns into vitriol. “I *meant* that I’d definitely plan a wedding away from *you* so I didn’t have to see dein spitzes, *mürrisches* Gesicht —”

Hermann hangs up.

Vanessa comes by early, later, to spend some time alone with him. She brings her own things to change into, and probably to attempt to pre-empt him choosing his own clothes and force him into something else for the ‘party’.

“What I did to deserve being cursed with this family, I will never know,” he sighs.

She glares, but it is lacking its normal effect - her full mouth is too soft. He said *Family*, yes. It *is* a fact now. Really, she’s been his sister for years; Dietrich getting involved has no part in that.

This is not *possessive*. This is simply true.

“What about *us* ending up with you?” she asks, then rummages in her bag and produces a brand new jacket, still in plastic wrap, which she shoves at him. “Here. Stop complaining.”

He takes it, cautiously, his eyebrows raised. She smiles at his look.

“That’s Ralph Lauren. I nicked it from a show for you.”

“I have no idea or interest in who that is,” he answers carefully, putting his glasses on to peer at it.

“I *know*. That’s why it’s perfect for you.”

He runs his fingertips down the lapel. It *is* beautiful, dark, the fabric smooth to the touch. “... Thank you.”

She *hmm*s, and passes him his shoes. “Polish those *before* you put it on. I know you’ll only do them again if *I* do it for you, so you might as well.”

When he’s done, dressed, Vanessa looks him up and down, once, then reaches to stroke his fringe flat — or tries, before he bats *her* hands away. She snorts, stepping back with her hands raised, her new ring flashing. “All right, all right, fuck,” she laughs.

Karla’s shriek when they enter the bar is deafening. Hermann flinches, but no one else seems to notice; the bartender barely looks over, so involved currently in throwing cocktails around ostentatiously behind a rectangular bar in the middle of the room, with beer taps on all four sides. Yelling would seem to be a common occurrence, here, then. Lights with Chinese paper shades bob on decking outside, which is fairly tacky, but there’s a grand piano in the corner, by the dance-floor. Hermann isn’t entirely sure what aesthetic they’re going for, or if it is working.

Dietrich has his arm around Karla, who looks lovely in a silky blue dress until she runs forward with a squeal to grab Vanessa, fairly violently, in a hug. Before *Hermann*, whom she hasn’t seen in person for over 15 months.

He cannot help but be *slightly* offended.

She notices, kissing Vanessa's cheeks, then leaning over to kiss his, then kissing Vanessa's again.

"What?" she shrugs at him, laughing. "She's my *favourite*." Then she stops, and tilts her head at him. "You look *nice*," she adds with a smile, laying her hand on his lapel briefly, then walks off to the bar arm-in-arm with Vanessa, leaving Hermann to shake her husband's hand and then to be accosted by his little brother with no warning *or* protection.

"What exactly is the point of a sister?" Bastien wonders, as he has before, muttering at Hermann whilst he hugs him with one arm around his neck. It's essentially an elbow-choke, but it's as nice as he gets.

"You try having three brothers," Vanessa calls back, loudly, over her bare, brown shoulder.

"Technically I've got six now, if we include *your side* in this!" Bastien yells back, and though he turns his head, this is still in *Hermann's* ear. Hermann shoves him away. Bastien looks as though about to protest, then turns suddenly back to face the women in their family again, smoothing down his close-fitting suit. "Hey, Karla! Get me a Mai Tai?"

"*Nein*, Bastien."

They bring drinks for everyone, though, when they return. Dietrich jumps up from their table to help carry them over so suddenly that he leaves it wobbling. Bastien rolls his eyes at Hermann across its sudden alarming movement, but then, Bastien has no *manners*. A case in point: he doesn't say thank you as he takes his drink from the tray, so Dietrich kicks him in one long shin.

He screeches, flinching, but saves his drink. *Priorities*.

"Dietrich, what *zum Teufel*—!" He glares at their brother. "These trousers are *Prada*!"

Vanessa, hopping onto the seat next to Dietrich, scoffs at him. "They're also fake."

Max snorts into his beer as Karla pumps two fists at the ceiling. "Oh I *missed* you, Vanessa."

She beams.

"I, on the other hand, really *didn't*," Bastien hisses in reply, putting his drink down on the table and leaning on Max as he rolls his trouser leg up to look at his shin, rubbing it furiously.

"You came round two weeks ago to see us," Dietrich points out.

"You were cooking." He eyes his leg and then glares at Vanessa. "I like *your* cooking."

"Everyone does," Dietrich agrees, adjusting his ugly cap.

Hermann sees the moment to interrupt, before he gets started on *that* topic. "*Meanwhile*," he says, cutting off more pettiness and immaturity, and everyone turns to him expectantly, "I'd like to question if you can even *register* pain through such constricted flesh." He nods toward Bastien's leg. "Did you walk into the children's section, accidentally?" They are the skinniest fitting trousers that he has ever seen, and this includes any that Newton has ever worn.

Bastien's blue eyes narrow at him across the table. "Says the man who never buys new clothes."

"Oi!" Vanessa says, pulling the idiotic umbrella out of her cocktail to throw at him as Hermann leans back, raising an eyebrow.

"Please *attempt* to remind me that I am happy that you flew all the way here to celebrate this event

with us,” he says, warningly.

Bastien sticks his tongue out.

Max, who until now had patiently allowed himself to be the prop against which he was leaning, flinches suddenly. “Oof, Bast, your elbow is in my kidney.”

“You’ve got two.”

“...Nice.”

Karla rolls her eyes and leans across Max to take a sip of Bastien’s drink, whilst she can. Max then blocks the shove Bastien tries to send her way. Vanessa puts a hand on Dietrich’s bicep as she laughs, gets a kiss on the cheek, and Hermann purses his lips, in the middle of all of them; happy, but reeling, swaying from one emotion to another, half-ready to be attacked, or challenged, or irritated beyond belief, or warmed by *something* from his head down to his toes. It’s like every meal he can ever remember from childhood, and yet, the only one of them that isn’t thirty is Bastien.

It possibly also resembles *every conversation with Newton* he’s ever had.

It runs much like this for the next hour or so, after toasts are made by almost everyone at the table, tears, Hermann spinning his cane one way or another in his hands under the table whilst he catches up quietly with Vanessa on the details of their tiny wedding. He feels overwhelmingly pleased with everything, *and* annoyed that they didn’t include him, and oddly nervous, something in his chest tight and fluttering, as the bar fills up, like trapped birds. He is not entirely sure why.

He *also* ends up somewhat stuck in the corner, after Bastien gets up and moves to ensure that he is not opposite Dietrich anymore, shoving Hermann along with a bony hip and then dropping next to him before turning to interrogate Max on how the prices of travel in London compare to Berlin at the moment. Hermann wishes he wouldn’t. For one thing, it’s utterly boring. For another, the PPDC are starting to have to make cutbacks and he hasn’t had a decent breakfast provided for him six months, nor can he *afford* new clothes, no, thank you. Everything in the shops is overpriced, anyway. Second hand shops are perfectly acceptable for shopping in. Not to mention that those countries where cheaper items were previously have been made in factories are also the same countries getting attacked by *kaiju*, and have been diverting funds *away* from cheap fashion production into somewhat more *important* things. Bastien knows that well enough; his last piece covered it in detail.

He’s just trying to wind Hermann up, as always. The vain little git.

Hermann missed him, God help him.

By the time his colleagues arrive it’s definitely *too* busy in the bar but the music’s not awful, and he’s relaxed somewhat with a shandy, his sister’s head on his shoulder, nodding along and looking up at him as he explains his latest work.

“Newton!” Dietrich booms, and jumps up. Hermann jerks and sits up straight, dislodging Karla.

He spots Harold first, his tall head weaving through the crowd of people and tables, with Newton behind him, chatting to Jessie, turning sideways to shuffle through the people, letting her go first. Across from Hermann, Vanessa makes a noise loudly enough that he can hear; a sort of excited, throaty, *dangerous* purr, just barely flicking her eyes to him before standing gracefully.

Oh...*bollocks*.

“Hey,” Newton says, first, waving a little awkwardly as he, Jessie and Harold approach the table. Everyone’s standing up but Bastien, still in conversation with Max; Hermann shoves him to wake him up and let him out.

Dietrich claps Newton on the shoulder. “Hello, Dr. Geiszler!”

“D.” Newton shakes his hand warmly, smiling. “*Gratuliere*, my man.”

“Danke, danke. This is my Vanessa!”

My Vanessa - honestly, she’s not an *object*. Hermann elbows Bastien again to make him *move*, and slides along the seat after him to get out, unfolding himself to stand and using the table as support. Bastien offers his arm, but he ignores that.

Vanessa, meanwhile, is shaking Newton’s hand now, grinning at him as he looks up at her with his mouth slightly open.

“Hello, Dr. Geiszler,” she says, and Hermann recognises that full, model smile she is giving him, and the meaning underneath. “It’s lovely to meet you at *last*.”

“N-Newton, please.” Newton shakes his head, stepping back into Harold, looking at their table. “Jesus, Hermann, is your entire family made of tall, sexy people?” he asks, glancing at Hermann as the rest of the group chuckles in a mixture of surprise, and some a little *uncomfortable* - then double-taking back at him. And staring. “...Uh.”

It cannot be *that* surprising that he has a new item of clothing, surely. Hermann scowls. *Newton* seems to be wearing jeans that are actually clean and what looks like a brand new shirt, since from what he can tell there’s not a single stain or hole on it, though the fact that it’s black might cover a multitude of sins. He hasn’t got a jacket, like Harold and even Jessie, but a waistcoat instead. He looks...nice. So. The incongruity of *that* entire thing is something to behold, actually, surely more than Hermann.

He looks at the table full of his family for a second, and then back, lifting his chin. “Yes,” he says in reply to the question, because why not. Yes, they are. Familial pride is an attractive quality in anyone.

“...Yep,” Newton repeats, after a second, his eyes huge.

“Evening, Hermann. Nice jacket,” Jessie says, leaning over to smile at him.

“Yeah, looking swish, Dr. Gottlieb!” Harold says, and gives him a thumbs-up.

Vanessa stamps a heel in triumph. “Bloody *told* you,” she says, to Dietrich.

“*Hi*,” Newton says, again, then jams his hands into his pockets and rocks back on his feet. “Soooo hey, uh, guess what, we all got this little *invite* last night,” he points out, gesturing to himself and their colleagues.

“That much is obvious,” Hermann drawls.

He introduces his family to his workmates, and vice versa. Bastien lays on his accent a little thicker when he meets Jessie, as if it’ll be impressive. Hermann can *feel* Vanessa’s eyes on the back of his head and sure enough, when the three of them have gone off to the bar with Dietrich, who is *insisting* on buying a round for three PPDC workers, Hermann sits down next to her pointedly, crosses his legs and sure enough, once everyone else is back in conversation, she turns completely

sideways in her seat to face him and prods him in the upper arm.

“Oh, my god,” she mutters at him.

“Vanessa,” he begins, but she prods him again.

“*Oh*, my *god*, this is hilarious. His *tattoos*.”

“I have *described* those,” he hisses back through clenched teeth, glancing across to ensure that everyone is still chatting amongst themselves. They are. He takes a breath and turns back to lean in closer to her and continue, “- and I know full *well* that you’ve googled him, you took such delight in telling me, so do not play so surprised.”

She shakes her head. “Pff! That was nothing. I wasn’t prepared for the flesh. He’s *tiny*! And what about those boots, does he wear those to *work*? He’s not on *stage*.”

“He does have *some* musical talent,” Hermann admits.

“Hm. Well, he’s cute, I see that. Pretty.” She grins, tries to prod him *again*, and he moves backwards to dodge it, grabbing her wrist.

“*Please* stop that.”

She chuckles, twists her wrist in his admittedly loose grip, and pats his cheek instead. “Ok, ok. But I can see why you were interested, *oh* so long ago. I think. Bit small for me. Plumbing the depths, I guess?” She laughs, once, at herself, but Hermann pauses to be shocked at how momentarily *furious* he feels, whitehot rage rushing up his rigid spine on Newton’s behalf.

She cannot *know*, though. What that means, or what he feels. What Newton is really like.

“Something like that.”

Her expression changes, looking at him, and she tilts her head thoughtfully. “Hey. I’m not... Is it ok for me to joke about this? You did.”

“Of course.” He looks down to adjust his jacket, tugging each of his cuffs sharply down, then puts a hand on her arm after a second’s thought. “Of *course*. All of that was a very long time ago, as I’ve explained.”

“Yeah. Your ‘momentary insanity’.” She uses air-quotes. He rolls his eyes.

“Yes, thank you. We are friends, now. Of a sort.”

“*Which* is so fucking intriguing to me,” she grins, “that I might be sick from trying not to laugh.”

“Wonderful.”

“But,” she adds, after a moment, playing with the ring on her hand. “Seriously? I’m glad you’ve got a friend with you. He probably knows you better than me, now.”

Hermann pauses, delicately. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Hermann.” She smiles at him, softly. “I’m not *upset*. It’s fine. Dietrich and I are close now, of course. He’s...my best friend.” She looks towards the bar, then back at Hermann, and leans forward after a second, putting both hands on his face and kissing his cheek gently. “Hey. I love you. But we’re allowed to change, you know. You can make new friends.”

“I *know* that,” he complains, but catches her forearms as she pulls away and tugs her gently in, to kiss her cheek as well - touched, and surprised. And reeling at the knowledge that it’s true.

He’s closer to Newton than her, now.

Good *Lord*.

He turns as Bastien starts to get up, catching his sleeve. “Get me a drink?”

“No need,” Bastien replies, nodding at the others, who are approaching with another couple of very full trays. Newton hands Hermann a beer from the one he’s carrying, and clinks his own against the lip of Hermann’s glass, nodding at him. He nods back, after a moment.

Everyone finds a seat, shuffling along, getting comfortable. Newton sits next to Karla and enquires after Max’s name again, politely, in German. When Max replies in their native tongue, he sits up straighter.

“Shit, du bist ein Berliner?”

Max laughs. “Ja. Und du?”

Out comes a rush of excitable, appallingly accented German, then, and Hermann sighs to himself, knowing that Newton will be hopeless all evening, now.

A few hours later, he was right; Max and Newton have ‘bonded’, much to Dietrich’s continued delight, though he’s now off somewhere dancing in the crowd as the music has kicked up into something faster and Hermann cannot see him. Dietrich and Vanessa are slow dancing, appallingly out of time, and messily; Harold’s disappeared into a crowd of locals with Bastien, Karla and Jessie are chatting extremely quickly about *something*, and the bassline is giving Hermann a headache. He’s slumped back on a sofa after someone – *Vanessa* – decided that the table they’d been allocated was too far from the dance-floor and moved them.

Bastien is the most drunk so far, of course. He always *was* a lightweight. He’s outside, getting some forced air, after Hermann had manhandled him awkwardly through the crowd, half leaning on him instead of his cane and half supporting him, and put him out there. This because whilst they were both at the bar he had turned to Hermann, clapped earnest hands on his shoulders and breathed fruity alcoholic breath into his face, and announced his intention to find Hermann ‘a bloke to sleep with tonight, because he loves his brother,’ who was staring at him in terror, and he’s trying to save the world so he deserves some fun, and *he* wants him to stop looking like he’s swallowed something’.

Then he’d turned to the man next to them, looking far too determined.

Hermann had had to yank his younger brother back by the arm, mortified.

He’d then ignored the drunken protestations all the way as they fought their way through the crowd to the door, about the fact that Bastien was sure somewhere in the bar was the ‘suitable guy’, the lamentations about the state of the pool of colleagues Hermann has to choose from, particularly the ‘short-arse tattooed one, as if he’d *ever*’, and also, wonderfully, the bit where Bastien expressed *no* surprise that Hermann’s still got that ‘stiff dick/spine thing going on’ just as Hermann hissed and yanked the door open, and shoved him through it first.

Max breaks him out of reflection on this, by finishing his drink and getting up.

“Ich muss mal eine rauchen gehen,” he admits.

Hermann pulls a face at him.

“Ich weiß, ich weiß. Ich *habe* aufgehört.”

“Really.”

“Ja?” He chuckles. “I’ll check on Bast, too.”

Hermann watches him leave, sneaking past Karla, and lets his head fall onto the back of the sofa, closing his eyes for a moment against the humid press of people and noise.

Someone sits heavily next to him, making the springs clang.

He opens his eyes with a snap to see Newton, face a little shiny from his no doubt *animated* dancing, leaning over to scratch the back of his knee, then flopping back next to him. He puts his feet up on the table, straightening his glasses.

“Hey. You need another drink?”

“No. Thank you.” He glances at Newton’s empty hands. “...You?”

“I’m good, I’m good. You, uh...” He laughs, shuffling lower in the seat so that he can lace his fingers across his stomach. “You have a good family, dude. Nice.”

“I’m aware of that. But, thank you.”

Newton nods, then nods again. “Also, then, while I’m pretty buzzed on life and gotta say still *beyond* fucking surprised to get an invite to *any* kind of social occasion with your family, even if it didn’t come from you but your awesome brother and his new wife, who, by the by, is *crazy* hot, and you said she’s a biochemist, right? I didn’t – I mean, Harold’s great but somehow I always forget to think of them as *sexy* people, which is probably stupid,” he says, in his standard style of communication: stream-of-damaged-consciousness, out *loud*, over the music, tilting his eyes toward Hermann. “But anyway,” he continues, “this is great, really, super fucking *sweet*, and so I think I *should* tell you in this mood that you, uh, you clean up nice, Mister Jacket Wearing sneak, and I’m gonna need you to take it like a compliment and not some thinly veiled insult like you normally do with everything I say that you’ll then ing up for the next 6 months, because I so don’t have the mental capacity right now to argue with you about your shoulders or your fashion sense. Or lack thereof.”

Hermann frowns, flushes, and is thankful for the poor, ‘atmospheric’ lighting. “I...do no such thing.”

“You really, 100% do.” Newton points at him. “I tried to give an opinion on your breach model last week and you unplugged all my screens.”

“You said that it looked like a 20th century Coca Cola bottle. I thought you were being facetious.”

“Usually,” he concedes, eyes fixed on Hermann, eyes *lovely*, “but not right now.”

“Ah.” Hermann touches his mouth briefly, in thought, in surprise, taking a breath and trying not to be too...*pleased*. He nods. “Right. Thank you,” he adds, then tries to make himself relax. He clears his throat, wriggles a little to get more comfortable because why not - he *is* comfortable, he reminds himself. With this man, at least, not the poorly bloody designed furniture. There is a spring digging into the underside of his thigh.

Newton watches him, with obvious enjoyment, as he puts his hands on his knees and taps his foot once on the floor in preparation. “You, also,” he says, and Newton raises his eyebrows when glances sideways to punctuate the point. “Look nice. Cleanliness is refreshing on you.”

“Ooh,” Newton winces, amused, “ouch. We were doing really well there, man.”

“Yes, well.” He shrugs, smiling. He looks briefly toward the dance-floor in the quiet, then, to see Dietrich dipping Vanessa sloppily, one of her feet kicking up as she laughs. They stumble into another couple who turn, annoyed, until they see her giggling face.

Hermann has to smile as well.

When he turns back, Newton is still looking at him.

“Yeah, you should definitely wear your own clothes more often,” he adds.

Hermann purses his lips. So *that’s* what he’d meant. “I *do* wear my own clothes. Unlike you, constantly attempting to steal the look of someone you *want* to be.”

“Oh come *on*, man,” Newton. “Dietrich’s one size, you’re another, and *this* biologist knows too big hand-me-downs when he checks them out. Sees them out. Sees.” He hiccups, suddenly.

Hermann narrows his eyes, then claps his hands loudly in front of Newton’s face, suddenly.

Newton moves backwards so abruptly that his teeth clack.

“What the *fuck*, Hermann!” he yells, voice screeching.

“Surprise,” he intones. “Stop hiccupping, you sound like a drunken idiot.”

Newton gapes at him. “You *shit*,” he says, wonderingly. “*You’re* the one who smells like beer.”

“I do *not*.”

“You do. I’m having olfactory flashbacks of your 30th.”

Why does everyone feel the need to bring that up, at the moment? He glares. “For which I entirely blame you.”

Silence, for a moment. They consider each other. Newton’s rolled his sleeves up past the elbows, now, in deference to the heat, the colour so dark against the vibrancy of his ink. It still always makes some part of Hermann nervous when he’s out with them on show; anyone could take offense at any moment, have a go at him. He doesn’t seem to even think of it. Or *care*. Hermann wants to take his jacket off too but doesn’t want to offend Vanessa, or make Newton think that he has somehow *gotten* to him. He has a new thought, suddenly, and follows it.

“What happened between you and Jessie?” he asks.

Newton leans backwards slowly, eyeing him as if he has gone mad, staring at Hermann down his nose. “Okay, you might want to warn me before you change topics like that.”

“*You* never give any such warning, yet *I* somehow manage to keep up.”

“Years of practise.”

“Hmn.”

Newton chuckles and looks away, adjusting his glasses again unnecessarily before looking back. “Seriously, dude?”

“Yes.” He realises, as he says it, that is it true. He wants to know. “You got a ‘free pass’ on your birthday. I’m claiming my own.”

“You can’t hijack this occasion; it’s D and V’s day.”

No. *No*. Hermann wrinkles his nose. What *is* this obsession that he has with giving people nicknames? “If you ever refer to them as *consonants* again, I may have to start drawing a line down the centre of the laboratory.”

Newton laughs, like a drain. “At least I put them in alphabetical order. Think of what could have happened the other way around. V.D. is *not* the way to go at a wedding reception.”

He chuckles before he can stop himself, his amusement coming out loudly, his eyes closing. *Scheiße*, he ought not to laugh but... He shakes his head, swallows his giggle, then fixes Newton with as close as he can get to an even gaze.

“Newton. Come on, now. What happened, between you?”

His lab partner sighs, then, long and slow, and rubs the back of his neck. “Alright. Fuck. In the interest of furthering your scientific research into normal human relations...” He shrugs. “Nothing, really. She’s amazing, casual fucking is fantastic, I can *highly* recommend—” Cutting off, exaggeratedly, his eyes widen before his lips curve. “Wait, nope, I *don’t* need to recommend that to you.”

“*Newton*,” he warns, tips of his ears hot. This is uncomfortable *enough*, attempting to find out about his friend’s sexual excursions without actually finding out too *much* detail, he really does not wish to go into his own.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Look. We just. We didn’t want the same things out of it.” He twitches one foot, up on the table, where one ankle is crossed on the other, tapping his booted toes against the top of his other foot along with the music. “It basically occurred to me that, you know, I’ve not *been* with anyone for years and 6 months we’re doing...that, but maybe I wanted a bit more. I sort of...” He looks out across the bar as he speaks, searching for the words, perhaps, and avoiding Hermann’s gaze. Which is fine, as he is quite happy not to have a conversation like this with *eye contact*. Newton laughs at himself, once. “I wanted a fucking *hug*, dude. You know? No, you don’t, ignore me,” he waves a hand, glancing back, “but. Anyway. I did, she didn’t. So.”

He shrugs, again.

Hermann thinks, as one song segues horribly into another with an even faster tempo and Newton fidgets a little, looking away again at the crowd, the skin under the open top two buttons on his shirt coloured and shadowed under the lights and his cheeks oddly pink, his knee bouncing now, on what to *say*.

He wishes he’d never asked, to be frank.

“...I see.”

Newton snickers. “Yep. Depressing, yo. But we’re cool, it’s cool. She’s lovely.”

She’s a complete *idiot*, is what he wants to say. He doesn’t.

“The bar?” he suggests, after an awkward pause – it is not just him, it is definitely awkward, for *sure* - because he needs a drink or, simply, a distraction, something to do with his hands, as he has never needed one in his life. Immediately.

Newton nods, furiously.

“Fuck yes. Please.”

He lets Hermann go ahead of him.

The rest of the night is a mess of memories, later. Dietrich attempting to drag him into a dance when an Elvis song comes on and him only partially succeeding in resisting; Bastien, after being sick in the bathroom, announcing that he feels *much* better and it is time for round 362; of Vanessa crying with laughter at Max and Karla waltzing around the edges of the dance-floor, looking for a way in though the crowd; of Jessie teaching Karla a lot of Australian slang to take home and inflict on everyone else she knows, before leaving around 2am with a little wave that Harold barely returns, so wide-eyed and distracted by watching Newton and Max playing a drinking game at their table that involves attempting to flip coasters on top of their pints, but seemingly more importantly, a lot of particularly *Berliner* swearing.

Later, there was himself, threatening to leave if no-one gets him a bottle of water because he didn't want to get up again, but he is absolutely *not* going to be able to move if he can't find his cane because his knee has started aching; Bastien producing it from where he'd been attempting to use it to recreate some moves from an old school play, for a bemused looking woman in a very tight dress. There was Newton, apparently, 'snogging some dude' against the fence on the terrace, according to Dietrich, leaning across Hermann at the sinks in the bathroom to get a paper towel and rub at the lipstick on his cheek from Vanessa, and having somehow managed to lose his hat but gain a necklace of plastic flowers. Feeling the need to *smile* whilst telling Hermann that he was rather impressed by Newton's 'moves' - which he did *not* want to imagine or hear about, no.

And, thus, then, there was him, finally giving up and berating Dietrich for not telling him about the wedding – complaining, stupidly, that she was *his* friend first.

Dietrich just chuckles at him, drunkenly. *Annoyingly*.

“This is not that robot when we were kids, Hermann – which was *mine first*, you know, but I let you have it, because I am a fantastic and generous elder sibling.” He's washing his hands again and when he turns to point, water flicks onto Hermann's jacket. He tutts, grabs a paper towel to blot it. “Do you know how damaging that can be, by the way? How many times I had to relight candles on my birthday cakes just so that Karla and Bastien could squabble over who got the blow them out next - and meanwhile *you're* trying subtly wipe your finger along the icing and Mum's *letting you* —”

“This is hardly relevant,” Hermann snaps, giving up on the jacket and leaning further back against the hand-towel dispenser.

“My doctorate in human relations would say otherwise—”

“Stop changing the subject!” He rips out another paper towel, screws it up, and throws it at Dietrich in frustration. “You both should have *told me*.”

“*Hermann*,” Dietrich says, and his voice is suddenly different. Dangerous, as he straightens, folding his arms over his shirt, to stare at Hermann for a moment, his jaw working. Hermann glares back, lifting his chin, but is wary. Dietrich is not normally *severe*.

He eyes Hermann for a moment, then finally shakes his head, relaxing a touch.

“Bruder. You are the most incredible person I know, but you *need to grow up*.”

He takes Hermann's cane from where it was hooked on the sink and passes it to him. Hermann takes it, wordlessly, then nods in response.

There are other things as well, of course. Newton, much later, when the bar is finally almost empty and the sun has got to be rising soon, surely, playing something silly on the piano and singing along.

Vanessa giving Hermann one pointed, pleased look across the room, which he ignores. His headache had returned around 4am, when he'd shoved Bastien along on the sofa.

He falls asleep there.

“Told you I'd find you a guy to sleep with,” Bastien jokes, blearily, half of his hair sticking up, when they're shaken gently awake by Dietrich - telling them that Harold's taken Newton back to the Shatterdome because they're getting kicked out.

“*Urgh*.” Hermann slaps Bastien in the face, none-too-gently, and lets Dietrich pull him to his feet.

All in all, an eventful evening. One that he takes a long time to recover from, post-hangover, post-how peaky Harold looks for the next few days, post-how many times Newton tells him, again and again, how much fun he'd had. He possibly, he thinks, will *never* recover. His thoughts stagger and reel for weeks.

In December, he gets a Christmas e-card from *Mrs and Mrs Gottlieb*. It's a picture of he and Bastien, asleep, on the sofa, heads tipped together, his glasses on the end of his nose.

Someone had gotten their phone out, then.

Newton spots it over Hermann's shoulder, whilst they're eating in the mess on the end of a table, piles of paperwork and their tablets between them.

“Oh, dude.” He laughs when Hermann closes his screen cover with a snap, too late. “We should add that to the Hall of Fame.”

He's referring to the pinboard that came with them from Tokyo and is partially covered, now, in an assortment of pictures of all of them asleep in the lab from various times (along with that old, newly laminated photo of their team, back in the garden in Lima, *still* kicking around) that Newton thinks is *hilarious*. Particularly being the one who generally takes and/or prints them out. He happily puts up as many photos of *himself* as anyone else, at least, but it is still a ridiculous habit.

“If you ask Dietrich for a copy of this,” Hermann answers serenely, getting up, “*I will* strangle you with your tie.”

He clambers out awkwardly, tablet and folders under his arm, and stomps back towards the lab with Newton's shocked, single laugh following him. A second later, the pounding of his feet follows.

“Alright, geez,” he says, catching up. “Happy Christmas to *you* and all.”

“Shut up and take this,” Hermann replies, and hands the bulk of his folders over. Newton just about catches them, then hums all the way back to work.

Chapter 19

[2023]

Gunter calls an afternoon in late January when Newt's in the lab, up to his elbows in vertebrae.

He can't actually move his hands, not with two fingers hooked under spinal column and another two pinching shut what is about to gush the hidden double-chord of fluid that he really wants to collect, actually, so he asks Hermann, who'd answered the line, to bring the phone over.

"C'mon, man," he asks, jerking his head and wiggling his shoulders in a 'come hither' gesture. "It might be about Hanna."

Hermann sighs, deeply.

"Oh, *fine*."

He crosses over, carefully, without his cane, and his hands look so pale against the dark phone that they're almost white-blue. That's the cold. And that's correct - *outside* it's fucking *boiling*, of course, the weather dry and evil even for this time of year, so in response the AC in the whole Shatterdome has been set to some perpetual loop of arctic cold. And then?

Broken. Spectacularly.

It's freezing indoors, and has been for 2 days.

Not to leap about shouting 'I told you so', but this *is* what happens when money gets diverted away from essential 'dome maintenance and acquiring him new, *fresh* samples, rather than already shrivelling lumps of flesh that stink of ammonia, and into modifying and rebuilding more Jaeger. Global funds are really starting to dry up, which isn't a surprise, but *is* shit.

The empty spaces in their lab have never been refilled. The rationing which started a while back in the countries with Shatterdomes is getting way less challengingly 'fun' as time goes on, and more of a necessary pain in everyone's ass. Luxuries and indulgences don't really exist anymore- he hasn't had decent chocolate in months. Hermann's sweet tooth is *really* suffering here. Newt's also had about enough of cattle and poultry, too, but that's really all you can get in Australia, now, and even that rarely makes it into the PPDC. What he wouldn't do for some *fish*. The ocean is too polluted around here to get any that aren't a major health-hazard, even if you could find them, with the natural species already so severely depleted.

Governments are pulling back to work on maintaining their own food supplies and industry, to *protect*, and there's a definite lack of the enthusiasm for the rockstar pilots, now, for the merchandise from a few years ago. Lines are drawing back, Walls are going up, and Hermann's mouth is turning down in response.

At least there hasn't been a kaiju attack for months. Not even over new year and Newt's birthday, which had seemed to be turning into a freaky tradition. Things have gone...still.

Hermann's predictive model isn't sure what to make of this. *Newt* isn't sure what to make of triple-plated kaiju skulls that resist planes flying into them and sweep skyscrapers to rubble in one swoop. Or the fact that you could buy kaiju lunchboxes a few years ago, and now he's getting

shouted at on the street for his tats?

Not that that hasn't happened occasionally since the first one, anyway.

So. Point is, air conditioning is the last priority for anyone, today. Still, it is pretty hilarious that Harold had to put a scarf and gloves on. If Jessie still worked in there she'd probably have caught pneumonia by now; she always had freezing cold feet as it was.

Yep. *Yep*.

Ouch.

She's been moved permanently to the engineering team now, which Newt can't deny he's relieved about. She drops by every now and then, though, steals some of Hermann's tea, checks in on Newt. He's not *dying*, he's fine.

The dude to his left normally scribbling fractions is way more of a distraction, nowadays, if he's honest.

Which is kind of new. And kind of really, really *old*.

Anyway, Harold kept shivering, clinking bottles together until he gave up and announced that he was going to work outside, where he'd irrationally be *more* comfortable. Definitely a bad move; Newt's not going out *there*. He's tough, he can ride this one out until someone fixes it. Or until *Hermann* gets impatient enough to roll his sleeves up, push the team aside, and fix it.

Newt is, however, considering digging out the scarf he took to Vladivostok, if only he can remember where he put it. As it is he's rocking an undershirt, long sleeves, 2 sweaters and an apron he wouldn't normally bother with but a) *warm*, and b) his mom got him this top sweater when he went off to MIT, so he wants to protect it from goop. Sure, it's a little depressing that he hasn't grown since he was so young, but hey, he doesn't get to wear it often. True, sweet style will never be uncool, no matter how old it is.

Hermann, meanwhile, muttered under his breath an hour or so ago, stomped off to his room, and came back out with a suspicious extra bulk under his jacket, so he might just be wearing *double* shirts and sweater vests, as he approaches Newt. And fuck knows he normally has enough inexplicable layers on a *standard* day.

No, though. That's not *cute*. At fucking all. Of course not. That'd be weird, remember? Which... Newt can't deny would suit the sitch he's living in.

He's been having a fairly *weird* time the last few months, yep. Maybe more. Stuff is weird. *Hermann's* weird. Hanna having a *kid* is weird, but awesome, and he's so damn proud of her for going ahead and doing this, even though her boyfriend had slunk back into insignificance after he found out, the asshole, that he often just wants to burst into song when she sends him updates. Pics of her *bump*. Her last sonogram picture's taking pride of place on the Hall of Fame.

But those are all pretty *nice* kinds of strange, whereas other things to cope with, currently, include the itching need to finish his back piece, the fact that he hasn't gotten laid in longer than Hanna's required to grow a new *life*, and the realisation that his friend, the stuffy dude in the multitude of faded, checked fabric, is apparently a-go with casual sex.

A-go go go.

With: hands on cheeks, and fingers in *hair*, and soft, intimate smiles on his face that are haunting Newt a little bit. Yeah. Hermann *smiling* is really not a thing that should be allowed. But he *has* been. Smiling. As much as he usually does, anyway, which is what, four times a year? Until the last few months of scowling, there's been no crying over Dr. Itami, he of the clean handsomeness and proper medical degree. No obvious pining. Hermann's just as abnormal as always. Turns out he really, really *can* have typical human, social friendships with benefits.

Which. Is fine. *Was* fine, more than, in fact - god speed, go *get* it, dude. Friends support friends in any quest for dick. Right. Until. *Until*. There Newt is, or was, trying to ask out an awesome woman who actually just wanted to do him, not date him, and there was the realisation and embarrassment cracking and breaking in his stomach, like an egg, all cold down his insides when Jessie stiffened as he kissed her, gently, and broke the kiss to lean back. Her face gone all *soft*.

Newt had known immediately. That was that. *Blown* it. She wasn't looking for that. Probably neither was he. Hard to...say. Whatever the impetus, anyway, that went *there*, and not long after, *more* insanity: an invite to Hermann's family celebration, Hermann in clothes that fit and made Newt's brain scream. Hermann saying he looked nice, once. *Nice*.

Personal, interdimensional portals in the world doing that thing where they chew Newt up and spits him out into a whole new place. *This* place.

Which sucks.

Here, where it feels like minus figures temperature-wise, and that that is attacking his score, IQ-wise, and he's *bored*, and Hermann's important to him. Too important to— He means, he's so grateful that this bitch wearing ill-fitting pants and an expression that plainly reads how little he wants to be in close proximity with kaiju bits and Newt, thanks, as he holds up the phone - that *this* guy still wants to work with *him*.

Even *if* every other day Newt also wants to poison him with chemicals and watch him turn purple on the lab floor.

Even if that's a *shared* notion.

Murderous rage is another look Hermann rocks, pretty often.

Still, they work and they're friends and he could never risk besmirching that, you know? Not going to fuck *this* up. Still. Not— Okay, okay, turns out Newt might just be in this new stage of his life where he's wanting a significant other, but it's not like he wants Hermann to fill that, it's just that he - pff, that'd be— Or even if he would, or *could* —yeah, unquestionably he's more open to just fooling around than Newt had mistakenly thought but that's a whole *other* thing. And. And what happened to Newt's fucking *youth*? What happened to the time when anyone would have been overjoyed to date him? He is a fucking *catch*. What the fuck.

Hermann wiggles the phone pointedly at him, and he. Blinks back, into the chilly, frigid - but not *so* frigid - *now*.

“Shit, sorry. Zoned out.”

“I hadn't noticed.”

He sticks his tongue out, then turns his jaw exaggeratedly for the phone. Hermann pulls a face and lifts it to his ear, turning away to look pointedly and longingly back towards his own workspace.

“Gunter?” Newt asks, twisting his body to hear. “Ja?”

Yep, Hanna’s not so much in labour as had a baby boy a few hours before, and wants to skype him from the hospital.

Cool. Cool. Okay. No problem. *Nein* problemo. Newt is so totally prepared for this.

Or was.

Now, he promptly freaks the fuck out.

He agrees calmly, nodding to Hermann to take the phone back and end the call - then bites his lip, spins, ties flesh, yanks his hands out, disinfects with a splatter, jumps across to the sink and flings his gloves off in such a hurry that one of them slaps into the tiles and slides down to the floor, so he has to lunge for it to chuck it back in the trash, and then he’s yanking his apron off over his head and running to Hermann’s side to practically - but not *really* - knock him aside with his hip, to get onto the best quality screen.

“Newton!” Hermann hops out of the way, awkwardly, gaping at him, then hovers over his shoulder as he sits down and attacks the keyboard. “Really, you cannot—”

“Not *interested*, Hermann...”

It’s not as if he doesn’t *know* the screen should be connected to LOCCENT at all times, in case of kaiju, he just doesn’t care.

He closes the current programme, hacks the network, adds a few lines of code, passwords, de-encryption, and then he pulls up his desktop, logs in, and calls.

“Come on, come on...” He jiggles his knee impatiently, until Hanna answers after just a few seconds, appearing on screen with no fanfare.

The picture is crisp and her face is tired, her bright hair pulled back into a ponytail, white hospital pillows behind her. Gunter’s next to her, shoulder in frame at first, then not, as the image shakes a bit – he’s adjusting the tablet, propping it up on the table over her bed.

“Newt,” she says to him, smiling. She always gets the first word in, damn it, particularly on momentous fucking occasions. Newt *tries* to say hi back, really, but unfortunately all that happens is a sort of stuttery, broken, loud exhale, because he can see a blob in her arms that’s a *baby*, all hidden in a blanket, and everything inside his ribcage has suddenly been set alight.

Exactly to his left but only just out of view of the camera, where he is just *pretending* to be busy, Hermann snorts, quietly, under his breath. Newt half glances his way, but Hanna is laughing outright at him, and he can’t breathe.

“*Ja*.” Hanna agrees with his sentiment, and he realises that her eyes are filling with tears, which does make him feel better, but also more wobbly at the same time. “I *know*.”

“Are you okay?” he blurts. She looks it, but you can never tell. Gunter’s hand pats her leg, from behind the camera, and she nods in response, smiling.

“Very. Very. So?”

Fuck, this is it. Big moment. Newt gulps, sitting up.

“This ist *Matthias*.”

She lifts the shape of cloth and it resolves into: a tiny, tiny dude. New, pinkish skin, a little scrunched up face.

“Oh shit,” Newt says, leaning in close, his mouth falling open and both hands flexing on the keys. “Oh *shit*, he looks like a prune.”

His voice comes out whining, breathless, and Gunter chuckles as Hanna laughs out loud, tipping her head back into the pillows. The baby crumples his face up even more at the noise and moves his head, his eyes still closed - he’s so *new*, and Newt makes another noise as well and just *flails* an arm out sideways, takes hold of Hermann’s upper arm and drags him even closer because he needs to grab *something* and that’s all he’s got, and holy *fuck*.

Hermann half-stumbles again and bumps into his chair, trying to wriggle free.

“*Newton*,” he hisses, trying not to be heard, all shocked and pulling back in embarrassment, “I do *not* need to be involved in your *private*—”

“*Look*,” Newt interrupts again, through his teeth, turning to gaze at him and just sag, fingers loosening on his arm, just curling in the fabric there. Oh my *god*, help, *look*.

Hermann does, flicking his eyes to the screen for a moment, and then back down at Newt, who feels like he’s making some sort of animal sound, maybe. Something in his face *must* be amusing because Hermann’s lips quirk, gently. Fine, Newt’s crying; so what? Real men don’t hide that shit. Hanna’s crying, as well. Gunter swims back into peripheral view to sit on the bed next to her and he’s crying too, of course.

Fuck.

Newt turns back to the video, taking a breath, wiping an eye under his glasses.

“*Hanna*,” he says, shaking his head in amazement, and she sniffs, teary, dipping her head to smooth her mouth along Matthias’s forehead. Newt just...stares.

It takes him a second to register that Hermann carefully puts a hand on him, cool fingers and weight somewhere between his shoulder and neck, and squeezes the muscle there.

He’s moving aside again before Newt can really compute— uh, no, *screw* that. He lunges.

“Hey!”

He grabs the back of Hermann’s jacket, and drags him back, into view this time, keeps him next to him instead of out of reach. Hermann sort of chokes, but he’s too slow to get away, though he tries.

“Wait, wait - guys! This is my colleague I’ve probably complained to you about. Hermann?”

“Dr. Gottlieb,” Hermann corrects, automatically, like a *machine*, then stops, straightening up as Newt’s family look at him in surprise.

Newt laughs. “Dude, mein Onkel Gunter und meine Cousine Hanna. Und Matthias!”

Hermann uses the back of Newt’s chair to balance his bad knee, sticks a hand in his pocket and

does his best polite, unruffled face. *Fails* to look cool about it, basically.

“Ah, hello. Freut mich, Sie kennen zu lernen. Congratulations.” Hermann nods at the screen, again, then ducks fully away, slinking off back to his corner after a quick, strange look at Newt.

Hanna frowns after him - then all of a sudden *recognition* lights her face. She breaks into a *beam*, and swivels her head to eye Newt, and he knows *that* face.

Ah, shit.

“So!” He says, swallowing and wheeling his chair closer. “Tell me things. Everything. Well, no, not *every* thing. Some things.”

She and Gunter look at each other.

“Who was...” Gunter begins, but Newt clears his throat to interrupt and he stops. Hanna’s expression is evil, bad, *kill*.

She shifts the baby in her arms and shuffles down the bed a bit.

“Is—” She begins, but *oh* no - Newt shakes his head once, very small, his lips pressed together. Just enough for her to get, he hopes. Please, *please*, don’t go there right now, he thinks, desperately, telekinetically trying to get it across with nothing but his eyes and their shared familiarity to help him out. He really hopes his glasses don’t refract the power of this look too much, because he cannot *stress* how much he does not want to have *that* very old conversation, again, right now.

Hanna stops, her lips still parted, her eyes narrowing. She’s obviously dying to ask, but doesn’t, and gives him a silent little nod instead. He does his best not to show exactly how relieved he is. Gunter, on the other hand: totally lost, frowning back and forward between her and Newt in total perplexity, his moustachey mouth open.

When he shows the slightest hint of saying something, Hanna slaps her free hand over his face, hoists Matthias higher, and starts telling Newt exactly how much he weighs, what time exactly he came out like ‘a slippery otter’, *what*, and just about exactly, in detail, how much that hurt.

Newt, eyebrows raised, just nods along. Details don’t bother him, it’s just all so...much; overwhelming, being happy, and relieved, and embarrassed, and wanting to be *there* so much that his chest aches with it all.

“And, hey. I want to ask you something.” Hanna changes subject, suddenly. “I know that we are not *religious*, but I - we want...” She glances at Gunter, who huffed about 5 minutes before when Matthias almost started crying and shifted around to take him, so Hanna could *gesture* as she talked. He looks up from the baby’s sleeping face to smile broadly, adjusting again so that he can put an arm around Hanna’s shoulders and grin at Newt.

“We want you to be godfather,” she finishes. All casual. Like Newt’s heart hasn’t just stopped. Then she frowns. “Or whatever that would be, for us. A guardian? *Pate*?”

Newt’s not sure either, but he’s distracted.

“I don’t...uh. Are you *sure*?” he asks. His voice has gone all tiny and stupid. “I mean, I’m – *fuck*, thank you, but I’m...not exactly what would be most peoples’ first choice.” He shrugs at himself, up and down, trying to summarise himself. Something along the lines of *Yeah, I’m awesome, but...really?*

Behind him, Hermann's chair squeaks once along the floor. He ignores it. Hanna's face has gone all tender again.

"Oh you *idiot*. *Ja*, of course. Of *course*."

"...Oh. Okay. Yeah. Well, whatever the word is," he breathes, "I'm gonna say *yes* and then break the call off now, if that's ok, I gotta go and cry forever."

His family laugh at him, as is apparently their wont. He nods and nods again, like he's stuck, like he's kind of dying a little, but that's great. That's *great*. He's even forgotten the cold.

He ends the call before his parents arrive - he doesn't need to see his mom dissolve uselessly, it'll set him off again - and then he's on cloud 9,999 for the next hour or so, slapping Hermann's shoulder in glee, taking the double high five from Harold's now-warm palms when he gets back, shivering happily at the cold now, feeling this new weight of responsibility and honour and giddiness. He basically floats around the lab, feeling lighter than he has in months.

Until.

"Godfather," he repeats, *again*, under his breath, working again at Hermann's elbow. Amazing.

Hermann taps his foot once and turns to him with a frown.

"I apologise, but I must agree with your cousin," he says, and Newt raises his eyebrows. "Well, you really ought *not* to use the term, given that you don't even believe in it," he sniffs, and Newt's expression turns to a scowl.

"Fuck off, dude."

Burning need to kick him in the shins, back, and rising.

By April, at least the weather's got more stable – disregarding all the effects of global pollution, sure - but anger's become the typical, everyday emotion again. Not having any kaiju attacks for so long probably doesn't help. At least half of the base are twitchy, too, on edge, waiting for it. The *other* half are slowly relaxing from the state of constant tension from the past few years, and sliding way too quickly into optimism.

The exact same thing happened before, when there was a gap for a little while, only now it's longer, and worse.

People really are so *predictable*.

He'd overheard a reprimand a few days before, for a group of techs who'd been perpetually late all week. He's noticed less guards on the posts a couple of times, walking in. Things are *too* quiet, Hermann says. Sure, he's paranoid at times, but Newt does share his lack of enthusiasm for no kaiju; there's nothing to *do*. And yet constant conference calls seem to be happening, and he's getting twice as many emails as when they're *busy*, which is totally absurd. As are some of the new and completely unbalanced and unfounded theories he's getting sent, too. Scientists from other bases digging out their weirdest ideas. Asking him to check stuff he *already has*.

In their own lab, they're just repeating old actions as well. Going over the same data, bumping up into each other too often.

They are told mid-month that their salaries will be docked, and capped, even further than what's already shrunk. And another just *great* surprise: they're being moved to Hong Kong, but it's not

yet confirmed when.

“Unusually vague, for an order,” Hermann mutters, next to him. He scrubs his fingers through his hair and shrugs.

“Good old fucking PPDC.”

He and Hermann turn to Harold to get his input too – but Harold, slumped in a chair, clears his throat and tells them that he’s not coming.

He’s had enough.

“I’m done, guys.” He’s not wearing his labcoat, Newt suddenly realises. Hasn’t in months. “I miss India. I miss *home*. I miss *sleep*. I want to go back and have a life, while I still can.”

Hermann is strangely quiet next to him, gone still. Newt is way less surprised about it. He sympathises, yeah. But he also just...doesn’t know where else he’d go. *Want* to go.

Good luck with that, he thinks, and means it, even if it’s bitter. Good fucking luck forgetting any of this, because he’s pretty sure he’ll never get away from it, even *if* they save the world.

“Okay, man.” He answers for both of them, as Hermann continues to suck the insides of his lips and say nothing. “Shit, but. Okay.”

Harold smiles at him, a little. “I’m not actually looking for your approval,” he says, softly, and Newt chuckles.

“Yeah, probably wise.”

“This is truly a shame,” Hermann pipes up, suddenly, *honestly*, shocking them both into staring at him.

After a second, Harold ducks his head and laughs shakily.

“Right. You can keep Kick Me, for that.”

“Oh *joy*.”

Newt thinks. “Woah. But I get Mona, right?”

He and Harold size each other up, for a second, and then Newt’s springing forward and running, elbowing the annoyingly lean and limber dude next to him so that he can skid across the lab and leap, trying to take it down before Harold can. He gets the frame in both hands and tugs just as Harold leaps as well, chinning him, and they end up on the floor, scrabbling for it.

“Watch her face!” he shouts, as Harold tries to get him in a headlock whilst he spins on his back and uses his feet like propellers, holding the painting up high over their heads. “Her beautiful face!”

Hermann sighs, clicking over to peer down at them for a moment, now stuck together with Newt’s head mashed into his own chest and Harold’s legs around his waist, only able to look up at Hermann through the v of his own elbow. It’s the most action he’s had in months. *Shit*.

“How I will *miss* this,” Hermann drones.

Giggles erupt somewhere around Newt’s lower back as he shrugs, which isn’t easy on the *floor*,

realising that he also hasn't heard Harold *laugh* for ages, either.

When a man's gotta go... Yeah.

He wins the battle, because Harold is still too nice, and props Mona up on the back of his door, hooking it on the peephole, rather than go to all the trouble of hammering a nail into the concrete wall when they could be leaving with little notice. This means that when someone turns up at Newt's room at the ass-crack of fucking dawn a few days later, he just opens the door rather than going through all the hassle of *moving* it to check.

It's either an emergency, or a booty call, and either deserves rapt attention.

Unfortunately, it's neither.

It's Harold, arms folded over his jacket and pyjamas, asking to come in.

Newt rubs his eyes sleepily, glasses in one hand, then steps aside to wave him through. Harold slips through the door gratefully, stepping into his private chaos without a word, and doesn't even add any more then to point out the mess, just hovers in the middle by Newt's tangled bedsheets.

"So," Newt yawns, shutting the door and putting his glasses on, "what'd you steal?"

Harold looks alarmed, immediately. "*What?*"

Chuckling, Newt points. "There's something under your jacket. I am not that blind, and you are not that subtle."

"...Oh." Harold snorts, his shoulders dropping a bit from nervous tension as Newt pads towards him, eagerly. "Right."

"I do, however," Newt continues, grinning, "also totally *get* and *support* your urge to steal shit before you leave." He stops, looking at the bulge under Harold's arms. "What'd you take? Chemicals? Tools?"

"Er, no." Harold unzips his jacket, takes a big, deep breath, and then pulls out an immediately familiar green-covered book.

Hermann's Euler biography.

The one that went missing when he was in Vladivostok.

Newt gapes.

"...You *bitch*."

"I have an explanation," Harold begins, but no, *no*, he does not want to hear that. He steps closer, dangerously, his voice going high, his pulse speeding up.

"Do you have *any* idea how much trouble I got in for that?!" he screeches. Harold winces, then nods.

"I really do, man, I was *there*. You were off safe in Russia and *we* had to work with him."

"I'm— I'm—" Newt runs out of how to explain his terrible, terrible feelings, and instead reaches out to touch the cover, running fingers down the well-creased spine. "...You are the *worst*, Harold."

"I *know*, I'm so sorry. You need to take it back." Harold pushes it towards him, urgently, and he takes it with a small laugh. A cursory flip through the pages in the silence that follows shows him that it looks exactly the same, including Hermann's handwritten notations.

His calligraphy has *not* improved since he was young.

He looks up, after a moment, to see Harold watching him, and blinks.

"I can't believe you brought this with you all the way to Sydney," he says, obviously. Shit, when Harold commits, he *commits*. Until he's done.

"Yes, well. Once the lie had started..." Harold pulls a face. "I got sort of tangled up in it, and I didn't know how to give it back."

"I can see that." He hefts the weight in his hand for a second, testing. "Why'd you *take* it, man?"

"Because I wanted Hermann to get over himself and find an excuse to call you."

Newt stops midway through juggling the book from one hand to the other, now, which would definitely make Hermann shriek, to stare at him.

Harold shrugs, and starts to play with his zip, awkwardly.

"Yeah... Look, it was *Anya*'s idea but I was happy to go along with it too. Hermann was making us *crazy*. All silent and pompous, and *missing* you. You know you guys work together so well, weird as it is. *We* knew you needed to talk to each other. So...I took it," he finishes, and tries to grin.

Newt takes his glasses off, wipes them on his t-shirt with one hand, and puts them back on. And yep, Harold is still there, spilling truth-bombs like it's going out of style.

"I did not *need* to talk to Hermann," he says.

"Yeah, Dr. Geiszler—" Harold hasn't called him *Dr. Geiszler* for at least five intermittent years of lab sharing – "You really, really did. You *need* each other."

"We're..." *Hoo*, where to begin. He hugs the book close, folding his arms over it like Harold had been. "Look, I appreciate the very old gesture, buddy, I really do, because obviously we're friends now, kinda, and it's been a highly satisfying work partnership in amongst all the *death rage*, but you can't just—"

"Newt?" Harold interrupts, like he never does, and Newt shuts his jaw with a click. "I'm not...I would never have pried, but can I just say something?"

Newt waits for it.

Waits for it.

...And yeah, it'd seem Harold really *is* that polite, because he's turning a *rhetorical* into an *actual* question.

He rolls his eyes, amused. "Oh my god, yes, fucking *what*?"

Harold grins. "Cool. Because I'm leaving, and I'm worried?" He points at Newt, then, ominously, with a long, dark finger. "Can you try to work together without arguing *before* the world ends, please?"

Well, that sounds simple.

Like it's a challenge at a *funfair*.

"It really isn't that easy."

Harold raises an eyebrow. He still looks scarily like Hermann, like that. "You know each other well enough by *now*, surely? Just don't *provoke* each other. I don't want to leave and have you two kill each other."

Ha. Also, *haha!* "Harold. *Harold*. How have you not gotten that we *love* arguing?"

Frown. "It looks pretty hateful to me. You say *awful* things."

"*No*, dude." Newt grins, suddenly, thinking about it. "No-one's *ever* argued with me like this, it's amazing. He still gives back everything he can and it's been *years* now? I'll never get tired of him, and I think he'll never stop fucking with me, and I *love* it, dude," he replies, all bright and beamy, and then— stops.

Harold's mouth has dropped open.

Newt. Fidgets.

"...Newton. *Newt*. Do you...*like* him?"

"Pff, what are we, 12?" he tries, but Harold just *stares* at him and he clears his throat. "Uh. I like everyone, man, you've said it yourself."

"No, *no*." Now it's Harold's turn to step towards him urgently, making him go one step back. "You don't. Look at your *face*."

"I *can't*—"

"You *like* him! How did... *You!*" Harold laughs, slightly hysterically, and reaches out to take both his shoulders in his hands, gripping him tight. "Newt, normally you tell us all the things we don't want to hear about everyone you think is sexy. How...how long?!"

He winces, now. "I dunno, man, I just...have this weird thing where I find cheekbones combined with intellect really appealing?"

"Oh. My *goodness*." Harold lets go, paces, and then sits down suddenly on his bed, staring at his hands.

Newt can't help but be a little bit annoyed: it's not like *he's* had to put up with being really attracted to an insane person for years, and do his best to smother it, and be *friends* with him, and then have it flare right back up again as if he'd never made *any* sorts of promises to himself. Like it had never gone away. Or gotten *worse*.

"Can you chill out, maybe?" he complains.

"Nope, you two are *never* going to work," Harold says, ignoring that, looking up.

Newt snorts. "Nope. ...Wait, what?" He steps in, closer, suddenly even more annoyed. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, he's not exactly good with..." Harold flails between the two of them. "Touching.

Sex. ...Stuff.”

After a second of shock, Newt has to laugh. At the ceiling, at Harold, at himself. At the whole fucking sad state of affairs. He puts his hands on his hips and bends over and wheezes.

“Uh...no. No, man. I’m not *telling* you, I’m just telling you, that he is. Fine. *Fine* with it.”

“...Oh.” Harold stares, then sits up. “Oh! But. I’d thought...” He trails off, confused, and Newt realises something, and has to put the book down carefully on his bed before he throws it across the room.

“*That’s* why you were funny over me and Jessie.” He sits down next to Harold, stunned, heavy. “Public displays of affection. You thought Hermann’d be *uncomfortable*.”

Harold looks that, now, and he barks another laugh, shaking his head.

“Dude. He really *is* your favourite, isn’t he? Look how *protective* you are, it’s so *cute*.”

“Shut up.” Harold elbows him, good-naturedly, and he chuckles, then stops again, because of the way Harold’s *looking* at him, all dark eyes and *empathy*. He sighs, nods a bit, vaguely, and then lets his head fall, lacing his fingers together over the back of his neck.

“I just want to *bone* him, dude,” he says, whispery, under his breath. “So, so bad.”

Harold makes a noise, sort of surprised and disgusted, and pats him on the back. “Hey, I don’t know. Maybe it’d work!”

Poor, sweet thing. “You just pointed out how bad an idea that is.”

“Well you can *work* together, so there’s that. Apparently you like arguing; that’s passion, right? I mean, it’s awful working *with* you, I’m traumatised for life, but you *are* friends now. Sort of.”

“This is not *helpingggg*...”

Harold clears his throat, and pats him again. “You do *stare* at each other, I suppose.”

Newt looks up, surprised - Harold’s gone all thoughtful, his voice speeding up in the face of Newt’s scowl.

“Yes - and, I always thought it was *rage*, or that perhaps he had a question but didn’t want to have to bring himself to *ask*, but...maybe I was wrong? Maybe he—”

Newt ignores any spike of possibility, any thud of *maybe*, because, *no*, and glares some more, interrupting again.

“It’s really nice to find out how much you’ve been strangely *observing* us, Harold.”

“Of course. You have...essentially been my science parents. I’ve. Learned so much from you.” He goes gulpy at the end, there and Newt is alarmed.

“Oh fuck,” Newt says, panicking. “Don’t start, dude, I will cry on you.”

Harold laughs and puts an arm around his neck, knocking their heads together. He’s so much *easier* in his body, his gestures, now that he’s decided to go, it’s amazing. Decision made, and he obviously feels *better*. Whilst Newt still feels all twitchy.

“Just go for it.” Harold, fixed and intent, is *scary*. “Go give him some.”

“Oh my god.” He shoves Harold away, and squishes his face in his hands in horror. “*Stop.*”

“He’ll love it! It’ll be good for him!”

Oh, *what?* He’s not touching that comment. *Not* going there. “He’ll say *no.*”

“He might *not.*”

“Harold,” he says, pointedly. “Look at me. Look at *him.*”

Harold does that, for a second, eyes glancing down to his faded *Dallas* sleep tee and tattoos, and back up. Then he tilts his head. “Fuck.”

It’s very unlike him to swear. Newt’s heard him do it maybe a handful of times, in all their years together. That shocks him, more than anything else. He gapes, and Harold sighs.

“Ok. Sorry. Look I don’t know, I can only guess. I didn’t even think he was *capable*... He’s your friend, right? He respects you, in his way. We were at his brother’s wedding. He shares his *food* with you.”

Newt just nods, in the way he learned in Tokyo: could be *yes*, could be *no*, could be *I’m listening but you’re insane*, and Harold recognises it, and huffs at him.

“Just. Have a *go!*” He pats Newt’s cheek this time, encouragingly. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“He kills me? Never works with me again?”

“At least he’s threatened to do that a lot, so it won’t be a *surprise.*”

Newt laughs, despite himself. This is end of the world logic, right here.

Great.

Later that day, in actual *day time*, he and Hermann wave Harold into the taxi. He gives them a double thumbs-up through the window, pointedly, and after a second, Hermann straightens and gives him a tight salute. Harold’s bottom lip starts wobbling then, just as the taxi pulls away, and Newt rolls his eyes, jams his hands into his pockets, and trudges back in.

So.

So.

Then there were 2.

And a book.

Which he sticks in a drawer in his room and doesn’t give back, yet.

He’s not *set* on anything, yet.

The lab feels huge with just the pair of them, but they remain at their original desks. It’s too much bother to *move*. The Wall’s been completed in Los Angeles and is halfway through up in Anchorage, now, and their Marshall takes a week’s holiday in May because she actually can. One

sleepless, lone night in the lab, flipping through channels and video connections across the PPDC network with the lights on half – he likes to have images in the background as he works, sometimes - Newt stumbles upon a feed from Vladivostok, and pauses.

The camera looks out from the edge of the helicopter platform, towards the sea. He can see the grainy silhouette of Cherno Alpha, striding about in the waves. Pausing, changing direction, striding again.

The Kaidanovskys are still at that, then. Same as when he was there.

The same fist is back in the pit of his stomach, too.

In all seriousness, though, there's being restless - which he gets, oh how he *knows* - and then there's a whole other type of restless, enough to get suited and booted and exhausted in a *Jaeger*. Respect. Newt normally just winds up passing out somewhere in the lab after a 5 day stretch. Or, once, in Tokyo, outside his door, when he couldn't find his keycard.

They've never talked about that one, thankfully, just ignored it since Hermann prodded him awake with his cane and then leaned over his prone form to open the door with his own keycard, which he'd had programmed to work on Newt's room since the...fourth? time Newt lost his card.

Newt had just mumbled a thanks and crawled indoors.

He starts tuning into that camera almost every night, whilst he's up working. Searching. Not sleeping. Because something *is* going on. *Something*. Out there. Inside, too.

He and Hermann discuss – *argue* – the lack of kaiju at length. Newt is sure their behaviour patterns are random, since each specimen is outwardly so different from the last, and internally - though fascinating – varies so much as well. There are genetic leaps between them, totally different phenotypes, limited shared traits, apart from the front limb placement that's been on a few, that rotator weakness he'd found a few years before. *That* hasn't been seen since, though. Undoubtedly he's spotted vulnerabilities, but a lot of that is obvious, like looking for holes in armour - joints, limbs, eyes. The Jaeger designs are stepping up every year in retaliation, and they're *cool*, but on occasion something comes out of the Breach and is so *different* that it just *floors* everyone, and then Newt feels – no, he knows, he *knows* that they should be trying to get something alive, to try and understand it.

Everything he gets is only a *glimpse*, not a full look.

It's frustrating, to say the fucking least.

Logically, then, he suggests capture, *again*. Or containment. Again. *Or*, him going out on the helicopters and getting down onto the ground to see them close up. Probably that'd be as they're dying from injuries, and fair enough, but at least that'd be *something*.

Hermann just shakes his head at this, and shouts that he is ridiculous. How biased, how blind, bla bla bla *fucking* bla. The PPDC are politer, but that's not exactly difficult; they just tell him that they cannot possibly risk his safety in that way. Same as they've been saying for years. Newt's pretty sure if he didn't have the most kickass brain in the whole organisation they'd have sent him out years ago on some suicidal mission, rather than holding him back and hoarding him indoors.

There's still no *imagination* in this organisation.

Hermann, at least, can think outside the box. His perspective on the world's collective time-out is different, to say the least. Newt does his best to avoid the topic for a while, not wanting the

conflict, or the ache it gives him in his gut, but Hermann eventually just sneaks up on him like Jessie used to – *confusing* – to read what he’s doing over his shoulder, and then he takes to just chasing Newt around the lab for a few days, insistently repeating that whilst he agrees that there are *no* coincidences in life, that such a gap with no kaiju for such a length of time must have meaning, that it’s *dangerous*, and that Newt ought to be thinking ahead, not looking *back*. That something is *coming*.

“You say I’m weird for my obsessions, but you are bordering on *creepy* here looking for *answers*, dude,” he points out, shoving his way past Hermann to get to the fusebox. The strip light over his desk is flickering again.

“I have *asked* you not to make mocking connections between my work and my private faith,” Hermann snaps.

“Yeah, well I’m not the one who goes sexually *glazed* at golden ratios,” he replies, spitefully, over his shoulder. No, no, and nope, he really *didn’t* ever need to see Hermann’s face looking the way it did, looking at Itami. Still keeps repeating on him, still coming up again and again.

Hermann flushes, beautifully.

“You—!”

He splutters so much with rage that he can’t finish, and meanwhile Newt wants to bite his pink earlobe so *much* that it makes him scowl, turn, and throw the cupboard open with too much force. It bounces back and smacks him in the forearm he has to lift in a quick save.

“You. Are a *child*.” Hermann mutters at his back, and turns away.

Yeah, well. Newt shakes his head, yanks out a handful of wires, and sets about fixing them, screwdriver tucked in his back pocket and pliers behind his ear. Hermann’s looking for a connection between events, but he can thrive on unpredictability, so he’s a bit more blasé about all this. However he’s *already* agreed with Hermann more than once that more kaiju are coming, and he’s waiting for it too. No way *he* thinks the war is done.

He just doesn’t need to talk about it all the *fucking* time.

Some more of that *time* comes along and goes, with no major global events, so Newt does what he does best: works. Keeps an eye on the feeds. Sends simulator updates. Observes bone dissolving. Ignores Hermann. Watches Hermann. Considers natural selection, looking for common links between the kaiju. Are any of them *related*? Are they connected? Where do you start with that – they’re *aliens*, fuck, it’s beyond awesome and he loves being out of his depth, but *drowning* in possibility isn’t exactly appealing. Half the time he’s looking for similarities to earth creatures, half the time trying *not* to.

Who carries the young, male or female? How does the kaiju *reproduction* work? They’ve found little resembling reproductive organs, yet, though there was a theory over in Nagasaki with one kaiju corpse that they identified as female, based upon a cavernous mass that was thought to be a uterus, but it was damaged, illogical, and the only genitalia ever catalogued had been twice: both male, both internal, both pretty much terrifying, head-tilting things to behold. He suspects at least some of the kaiju types they’ve seen have been hermaphrodites, but never gets enough of the body to be sure.

And he’s considered all this before, of course, but coming back to it now feels right. So. How are the young carried? Raised? How can they all be so *different*?

Hermann curls a lip at this area of study in May.

“You simply have babies on your mind, and it is colouring your work,” he suggests, nodding towards the photo of Hanna and Newt’s *godson* tacked up above his desk.

He also thinks all this conjecturing about reproduction is entirely too obvious, and *vulgar*.

Newt hunches his shoulders and works on developing ignorance, and selective hearing. Two things he’s never been good at, but *Hermann* cannot talk. Hermann boned his *doctor*, and no-one that... lidded, no-one who’s got a medical *professional* - Newt had noticed Itami always had his name badge perpendicular to his pocket, yeah - to wantonly touch his hips in public can be anything like the cold fish in bed that Newton had imagined him to be.

Or, possibly *hoped* for, occasionally, just to remain indifferent. To help with keeping his hands away.

Important to note, here, that usually in his imaginings Hermann was pretty enthusiastic, even if he did say so himself. Imagine, himself. But he doesn’t anymore.

Right.

Anyway, final analysis is that Hermann just might be *actively* sexy, not just in Newt’s eyes but more in *general*, and that’s fucking unfair. So now he’s reduced to observing and considering *Hermann*’s sexual functions, for more signs of outward desire, and motion. At the same time as the kaiju. He can *never tell him this*. Seriously, this is Newt’s *life*, one freezing cold shower and grumpy evening at a time. Pent up desire and old rage are coming back tenfold, all tightly layered up with this new sort of longing? Great. Fucking great.

Something needs to change.

There’s no method, still, of placing the *age* of the kaiju they’ve seen, so Newt starts thinking about that in June, July. He’s considered it before, but how old the kaiju were before they got killed wasn’t anyone’s main priority or a ‘useful area of study’ (not his words – *never* his words), so it’s only been a side consideration, previously.

Now, he looks for marks in bones, emailing Hong Kong to ask them to get past the cultists and take some better photos of the Reckoner skull for him, digging out samples and records to look for signs of growth or injuries. Proof of *age*, as rings in trees, as skeletons show. Bone density, scars, deformities, injuries. He does a bone test on part of Hardship’s skull protrusion, to try and plot *ahead* how the kaiju might have aged. Like the way the colours of his tats will fade with time, like what his own x-rays would prove about his childhood, if someone looked. Like all the things Hermann’s would tell.

Things *he* knows, because Hermann told him. Because they’re *friends*.

Ugh.

He goes back into vertebrae again, skull-plating, ulna, tarsus, sacrum, mandibles and teeth, but there’s *nothing*, other than the cauterised damage from Jaeger. *Crazy*. One kaiju could be 3 weeks old, and here another 143 *years*, for all they know.

How long *could* they live, if they weren’t getting killed by Jaeger?

That’s too much of a something to be ‘nothing relevant to current work’. There has to be something common, some species link, some element similar to the shared toxicity of their chemical make-up.

Something *more*.

Arguably, yes, also he is fully fucking aware that he's looking for tessellation and design here, just like his lab partner does. Only *his* patterns are *sane* and *tangible*, rather than some unproven thought off somewhere in Hermann's brain that he can only explain with numbers.

Hermann doesn't notice this new predilection for pattern enough to tease him about it, though. All his focus is fixed on the breach, now.

Dude is actually staring into the abyss.

That could be a bad sign.

Maybe he misses Itami more than he's letting on.

August comes, and August is about when Newt loses it. He never did well being overlooked. He admires Hermann's focus, always did, but the fact that Hermann's missed this *prime* opportunity for common ground and mockery isn't right. Maybe he's on edge, too. And maybe it's something *small* that sets Newt off, maybe it's *insignificant* to Hermannbutshit, it's not to him. So.

He picks up the threads of an argument from the week before - or year, maybe, they've always been good at restarting old conversations. Mostly because once Hermann gets a grudge, he *never lets it go*. He might not have given a lot of clues about it that day, but fuck it. Hermann'll work it out. He'd better. Because Newt really *could* kill him right then. He could actually *strangle* him with his bare hands, today, and he wouldn't even be sorry if that prevents them saving the world.

How *anyone* could want to save a world with Hermann Shitting Gottlieb in it though, he has no fucking *idea*.

Said scientist watches him moving things around on his desk, pointedly. His eyes burn tiny little holes into Newt's back. Newt flexes his shoulders irritably at the thought of it, and Hermann makes a noise, but he doesn't turn back to see. He hasn't said a word all morning, or played any music, and Hermann's finally lifted his head from a halo of holoscreen long enough to notice.

"Newton," he finally, *finally* says. "What exactly is the matter?"

Newt ignores him some more. Work it out, bitch, he thinks. Just fucking dwell on it for a bit. He kicks a drawer shut, rubs his face with his hands, then stretches to grab his keycard and his tablet and sits at what is normally Harold's desk to open his email.

"Is this display of petulance because you are still frustrated that I will not give you a nickname?"

A *ha*. Newt spins the chair, triumphantly, alight with the fires of righteousness and rage.

"Oh, is that Dr. Gottlieb?" he asks, folding his arms. "Taking liberties with the *intimacy* of your address?"

Hermann narrows his eyes. "I shall take this mockery as a yes."

"You do that!" he agrees, sprawling just to annoy Hermann. Yep, his angry expression jumps up a notch as he gives Newt this fabulous *withering* look.

"I *hardly* see that this is such a thing to get worked up over."

"You— *What?!*" He gawps, mocking. "We have worked together for seven years, man. Seven.

Painful. Years. The least you could do is shorten my name occasionally.”

“I simply don’t see the need for this childishness!” Hermann frowns down at him, glasses on the tip of his nose, and Newt wants to *slap them off*. “I have allowed you to use my Christian name—”

“Ohhhh *wow*,” he interjects, because seriously? *Seriously?*

“*Newton*.” Hermann huffs in frustration. “Why this desperate need for me to call you something that you are not?”

“Something that I— *Herm*. You should know you really call me a lot of things, actually, and I don’t complain about those - all I’m asking for is you to loosen up one tiny *bit*.” He’d start to list all the terms he’s been given in the last few years, but that’d be like he *cares*.

Hermann rolls his eyes. “I only deem you what you are. And do *not* call *me* that. Two syllables ought to be manageable for you by now, we have been *over* this.”

“Yep, we have, you and your constant need to *count* things as people are *speaking*. Which is rude. *I* am making a point, buddy.” He makes another with his middle finger. “All I’m asking is for one *nice* nickname. *One*.”

Newt wasn’t sure at the beginning, exactly why this felt so important, but now he is. He’s testing his own wild theory, because it’s been 10 months without a kaiju and everyone’s going fucking *agitated* and nervy, and it’s *not just him*. This makes sense. If Hermann can’t even bring himself to be more terminologically *informal* with Newt, then surely it just proves that he’s never going to bring himself to *touch Newt*. Like he’d always believed. Known.

This is the worst logic he’s ever used, he knows that. All desperate, dull times and no play makes Newt an idiot boy, right.

But you know, it’s not exactly *easy* to experiment on Hermann. It’s confusing as *fuck*.

Because things might just be worse than he’d thought.

And he’s *thought*. That Hermann *might* theoretically have been a bit more enthusiastic than Newt had ever imagined, had he sidled up to him in the lab in that first couple of years and breathed into his ear, tugged his shirt out at the back so that he could slip fingertips underneath it – only now? Now, now, *now*. Here. They’re friends, and he hates him, and even if Newt doesn’t have a technical medical degree he’s still a *doctor*, and he’s always had a tight ass and fierce, relentless charm, *but* it’s still gotta be so statistically unlikely that this charm is ever the unique, specific sort of part-Berliner, colourful and in-your-stupid-gorgeous-*face* kind of charm that’s ever going to work on half Bavarian prigs.

And anyway. Newt doesn’t *want* to be charming. He’s *tired*.

He just wants to be *himself*.

Hermann gets on with him as a person, right? He’s still *here*. Glaring at Newt with his hands balled in fists by his sides. Can’t he just... Can’t he just be *closer*, here?

“It is a *form of respect*,” Hermann insists, in answer, his jaw clenched. “If you weren’t so *inanely* desperate to be so bloody *casual* with everyone, you would understand that.”

“The fuck does that mean?” Newt sits up, quickly. “Did you just...are you implying I’m *easy*?”

Archaic associations have no place in this important study, he thinks, whilst Hermann just looks shocked.

"Of course not!" he splutters. "How could you— no, you utter *fool*, please do *try* to think *sometimes* before you open your mouth."

"Oh." Newt sits back, a little. Possibly he should have slept before they had this argument. Again?

"I *meant*," Hermann continues in a growl, furiously, "that I remain utterly shocked and disappointed that none of the Corps' soldiers have reprimanded you for your lack of propriety, yet, and sincerely and constantly hope that they do. Soon. Aggressively. You could *do* with some discipline in your life."

And so Newt's back up and rolling, and getting to his feet to shout in Hermann's face.

"Oh well I'm *sorry*, then!" he yells. "I'm so *sorry* that I don't feel the need to salute them all constantly as if I've got a magnet in my hand and a thick, metal *skull*, you fucking *robot*, we all know you have a thing for Jaeger but you're not *actually one*!"

Hermann kicks him in the shin, hard, and then ignores him for the rest of the week.

That went well, then.

Newt's probably going about this all wrong. Newt's ignoring Hanna's questions, in her emails. Newt's provoking *himself*. This kind of masochism is a bad sign. He feels really weird about the whole thing, yep.

More cuts come, more changes. Someone in the PPDC seems to have decided this is the perfect opportunity to push through getting more funds diverted into the training programme, getting the current recruits through and into full work. Hermann, who keeps an eye on the Jaeger updates, because he is a *geek*, pushes into the queue in the mess hall behind Newt and nudgeshim with the edge of his tray to tell him, under breathless breath, of a quiet notification he's just seen go through about Pentecost moving an old jaeger. From the graveyard, up to Anchorage.

Newt, currently involved in staring bleakly into the limited buffet selection, points out that he's not talking to Hermann.

Talking is just one thing. *Talking* just fills a void. Hermann thinks *he* can't be silent? He can be fucking silent. See? He's never said anything about that pledge to himself not to *dwell* on Hermann in certain *situations* - which he gives up on right around September, to make a mental point, and fantasises about, in no particular order: throwing his best brogues into a specimen tank and watching his face when he realises that they're sinking to the bottom, how his arms and chest would look in a wet shirt if he fished them out, and what his stomach is like underneath, so flat, so *lean*; about smashing up all his fucking blackboards, probably with his own *fists*, or printing out all of the official complaints that he knows Hermann's sent about him and folding them into paper aeroplanes and bombarding him with them, particularly to see if he can get one stuck in his hair; about *kissing* his hair, particularly that part at the back he sometimes gets badly shaven, about long fingers in his own, about kissing him against shower tiles and biting his bottom lip; about sneaking into the gym at 2am and licking the sweat from the tendon in his throat, behind his ear; about finding a way to get him fired, dramatically, about finding a way to get him to look at Newt and see something he'd like to fuck, about how to get him to look at Newt and see something he'd like to *sleep* with, maybe, someone he'd let sleep *on* him, someone *he'd* invite to an event with his family and not watch unsubtly all night to see how Newt was with them, to see how easily Newt had found it to tease Bastien about his accent, to try so hard to be with them, to be surprised

himself at how comfortable he'd been, and how important it was.

About whether he should have put a hand on his long thigh, on the couch.

About what could have happened if he had.

He also thinks long and hard about putting a bet on when the next kaiju will come, like Polina admits in an unexpected phonecall – she really *is* bored - that they've got going on over there. Morally and ethically wrong, yeah, but Newt's tempted. He's got an advantage. His wits, Hermann's predictive model, though it's struggled a bit this year sure. Shared tenacity. And, *man*, his lab partner would be so good at that shit, if he'd let himself. The possibilities are crazy. Hustling. Counting cards!

Maybe after the war they can go and scam the rest of the world. People underestimate them both enough, Newt can definitely use that to their advantage.

Hermann ought to be flattered, really, if he knew all the things running through Newt's head whilst he's also ignoring him, on his side of the lab. *His* side, yeah; Newt gave up and painted a line down it just as Hermann had threatened to a few months before, using yellow paint he stole from the woefully underused maintenance closet. Division is great, but here he's *mentally aligning* himself with him, in a *future* and *uncertain* scenario.

This is probably as close to good faith as he'll get.

And also the quickest path to realising his own insanity.

Point A to B, Newt *wants* Hermann in his life. Maybe for the rest of his life. He's forgotten who he was before all of this, how he worked. Kaiju structure, lab lighting, uneven blood pressure, the smell of chemicals and the exact shape of Hermann's profile: at least one of these things he would like never to go away. Does *Hermann* feel that? How do you even *approach* bringing up this sort of topic? Asking someone to never leave you, no matter what you do?

Normally Newt would go in hard and blunt, and probably too tactile, here, but. Uh.

No.

It's the 30th October before a kaiju finally comes, near Panama.

Relief is a word no one wants to use, but a few people definitely feel. *We're not going mad!* – or, *We were, but now we can get back to normal. Hallelujah.*

The kaiju is immense, and arguments fly about what category it is, before settling on III. It's floored in record time by some restless pilots, just before Hallowe'en - and what then turns into the messiest Shatterdome undercover celebration on the 31st that Newt's *ever* seen, and he's worked and breezed through a lot of them in his time.

Seriously. People complain that *he* likes kaiju. You'd think most of the Sydney staff are pretty much in love with them, too, given the way they party furiously and messily in dodgy, hastily cobbled together costumes in the turbine room, over the sound of humming fans and occasional blasts of steam, as the clean-up begins again outside.

It occurs to him, when he stumbles upon the festivities, that there is a whole generation of people across the world who have become totally, stockholmishly *reliant* on word-ending terror and pressure, here. Hermann looks pretty unimpressed by it as well, his cane clacking along the

corridor as he comes up behind Newt and surveys the scene.

He stays, though, long enough to sample some of the expertly distilled spirits it turns out *Harold* had been perfecting in his free time, and left in Jessie's care, and goes to slump in a corner, sitting on a warm pipe.

The fact he's there at all means everything really *is* fucked. Things. Are. *Weird*. Polarity has reversed, up is down and down is sideways, improbability drive engaged, and Herman's big fingers curl around the glass bottle and Newt, glancing over whilst gazing about the translucent crowd, gets it, suddenly.

Gets it.

Something sharp goes down his spine and he— *knows*.

Hermann looks just as appealing when exhaustedly rubbing tension out of his thigh when he thinks no-one's looking as he does at— at *any* time. Shit. *Fuck*. Hermann's laugh lines, Hermann's tired lines. Hermann's mouth. Hermann's brain. Hermann's temerity and stubborn, stupid perspective. Hermann's *skin*. He pushes and he pushes and he *pushes*, because he wants Hermann to push back. To touch him.

Newt doesn't just want him, or need him. Newt *wants* him, wants him. It's not just this.

It's *that*.

He's in fucking love with Hermann Gottlieb.

...

Oh, *bitch*, he thinks.

And.

No, no, no.

Jessie wanders over with a drink and touches his arm, surprising him. He jerks to face her, his mouth all tight and set, his pulse throbbing in his ears.

"No costume?" she asks, smiling.

He blinks once, slowly. Then he convinces her to go steal him a jumpsuit from her department, takes it into the bathroom, shoves his glasses up into his hair and ducks his entire head into a sink of cold, overly-chlorinated and chemically sanitised water so that he can gulp bubbles underneath, his eyes open.

He rocks back up to the 'party' (no-one's actually using the word, but it *is* the best word) with his hair wet and slick, proclaims himself the most tenuous looking Elvis of all time to anyone that asks, and commits himself to wasted oblivion and a sweet, shuddering sort of release. Relief. Re-alignment. The music is awful. Hermann leaves. Everything old is new again.

He doesn't think about it, not right then. He happily doesn't *think*.

November brings another kaiju. December a third. They get notification of being moved to Hong Kong, finally, on the 15th.

Hermann starts one of his running, snide commentaries on the skills of the people that come in to

pack up and move their shit, and Newt just. Nods, tightly, along.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

I am sure after researching that the Wei's native tongue in Shanghai would have been Shanghaiese, but that Mandarin would have been fairly prevalent, and for Hong Kong, Cantonese? So I'm having them good with all. But if this is TOTALLY WRONG please tell me. I have them speaking English so perhaps I am worrying too much, but these things *bother me*. One day I will write a nice simple fic and just ignore details...

Also this chapter has been split into two, so please consider this part 1 of 2024 - the rest of the year will be in Newton's POV in part 2.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[Dec 2023 / 2024]

Fine. *Fine*. Even on first impressions, Hermann can admit that Hong Kong is a wonder.

Life bursts from every building and alley he can see, where rebuilding is going on around lingering damage, holes with skyscrapers next to them, construction sites, temporary homes, markets selling everything imaginable where they should *and* shouldn't be. Things Hermann hasn't seen for a *long* time. Old PPDC posters have been plastered over with homemade ones depicting the Wei triplets, and there is a dragon symbol repeated on almost every street that he suspects is theirs, as well. Similar graffiti covers concrete, cranes, doorways, balconies and walls on every street they pass – and wherever Hermann looks there are *lights*, in every normal hue and more. Neon, startlingly bright.

They pass Reckoner's skull and the temple within, during their taxi ride – once upon a time they would have had a *transport* to the base - and Newton presses his forehead and nose hard against the window, so that he can peer up at it. Hermann leans a little across the middle seat to crane his neck and take a look as well.

Huge. Insulting. Oddly lit.

As to be expected.

He's never been in a busier city, and that includes Tokyo, though that city's population had, of course, been heavily decimated in previous attacks.

Hermann likes this one. Not least because he's so pleased to get out of Sydney. *Distantly* pleased, to be precise - there hasn't been any time to actually stop and appreciate it. After so long without kaiju there has now been one a month for the last three, and the addition of this data to his predictive model is spiralling out new possibilities that he is attempting to keep on top of. What the new year could bring, he is unsure, but he *knew* that he was not being paranoid, no matter what Newton had said, laughing at him across their old lab with his bloody hands waving all over the place. Hermann is *aptly* busy. Moreso, now, with the kaiju apparently coming with such small

intervals in-between.

The move has come at the most inconvenient time possible, as always, but they had managed to get it over and done with efficiently. Packing up the lab and their things and yet another plane ride with Newton fidgeting, staring out of the window, his knee bouncing incessantly until Hermann had snapped and moved across the aisle to get away from him, at which point he'd blinked out of whatever daze he was in, glancing over at Hermann - and stopping.

This only proves that he *was* doing it just to annoy him. It wouldn't be out of character, given the way he's been for the last few months. In the end, Hermann had been distracted enough by work on the short flight that he probably *could* have put up with it, and this is a blessing – as continuing distraction is going to be crucial, if he is to carry on managing to work with Newton.

It's been a miserable year with him, to be frank. Months with mere moments of brightness, whilst the rest has contained the usual background attraction and a more pertinent, current *ire*. For the last 9 months at least Newton has name-called, teased, provoked, wheedled, whined, shouted, jabbered, sniped and *bodily* aggravated Hermann – and he is at least *partly* ashamed to admit he's been doing the same, whenever possible. Whilst also studying, researching, plotting, and streaming constant feeds and seismometers of the breach location, of course.

Any professionalism that he'd ever managed to force has *utterly* dissipated. They have been... short, with each other. The tensions of work building up again, the inability to relax without knowing what is coming next, being crammed into too close a space. Hermann is *restless*, yes. He would like to see anyone else on the planet try being forced into a working space with so...*unique* an individual as one Newton Geiszler, he of the incessantly appealing shape and patterned skin, and determined ignorance of sane courses of study or logic, and *not* become frustrated.

It is not as if they have ever been exactly *easy* around each other, but Newton had been a friend, truly, for a good while. The mere concept would have seemed laughable years ago, but together they had determinedly made it a reality. However. Newton has also been so particularly erratic and short tempered, recently. *Particularly* now that it's just the two of them. A lesser man than Hermann would likely use this as a reason; to blame it on Harold having been a calming influence – whereas in reality he'd just become adept at ignoring them, disappearing into his chemicals with headphones on, and leaving them to it. They have always quarrelled, but do seem to be moving to it much more quickly than before, currently.

With far more *viciousness*.

Perhaps they are too familiar, now. The shortcuts and shorthand between them is complex enough that they can find each others' weaknesses with little effort. Neither of them is ever cowardly enough to be *vague* with an insult. Call it stress relief, call it reflex testing, it has always been a part of their working relationship. Newton is not a patient man, and neither is Hermann - and since as a general rule no one else can keep up with them, it falls to them to 'motivate' each other.

Equal parts aggravation, and stimulation.

Newton is...stimulating. Yes.

At least the fact that he seems to take as much gratification from the confrontation as Hermann does, has made him feel easier about it all. About *enjoying* it all. Things have become somehow worse, and improved between them. Hermann does not regret any decision he ever made – regret is for people with less belief and less *drive* - he simply *also* wishes to have him fired at least weekly.

Fine.

When they land, he waits for Newton to begin babbling about the city but he does not indulge what he *must* be thinking of, and is instead atypically quiet on the journey. The sight of the Shatterdome as they pull up sends them both into a moment of appreciative silence, however.

Hermann knows, realistically, that they are all the same – a small set of blueprints, each basically modified to suit location, with generally similar functions inside - yet somehow this one appears so much *bigger* than the others.

It *was* built first, he remembers. More grandeur, in a metallic sort of way, and less streamlined. He eyes the walls of the hanger that makes up the foyer suspiciously, after they are taken indoors, then is distracted by thinking, for a moment, that he recognises the harried looking Officer who has met them from Lima. Then, no. Perhaps it was just the shock of hearing the same accent again, after so long.

If she notices him frowning at her, she says nothing, and instead takes them straight to their workplace without any sort of tour.

“You probably know your way around these places well enough by now,” she says, giving them a shrugged explanation, and then leaves them in the spacious, simply lit lab.

They have been given it entirely for their own use; whatever team was previously there have long moved on. The two of them *are* to be the entire K-science team, here.

This is *absolutely* fair enough. Hermann has long been thinking it could - and perhaps *ought* - to be this way. Undoubtedly they have enough expertise to cover their respective fields alone. They were offered assistance as they need it, but hope that they will not. Part of Harold’s work has been taken by Newton, and the rest by a scientist over in what had been their second lab, in Tokyo. Hermann does not require much else but the space, and enough energy for his visualisers, blackboards, holo-screen, and kettle, all of which have already been brought in.

That and spare room for Newton to keep his own projects going, enough that he won’t *complain* about it.

Quietly, Hermann hopes, half-watching Newton flit around the room, checking what of their things have been brought in already and giving the space his practised once over, that somewhere *new* will give them both insight. Perhaps a fresh start. It is, after all, *possible*. Dire as times may seem to be, they might even be able to work in this lab without the bright yellow line that has been splitting them. He fidgets, thinking of it, glancing down to the metallic, meshed floor. *Not* his brightest ever idea. Just a moment of...passion, given voice.

Hermann feels strangely unsettled by it, in truth, even though it was simply paint, not an actual barrier. Both had crossed it numerous times, in order to irritate each other. Really, if Hermann indulged in *every* moment of passion that crossed his mind... Well. It would be a fairly different working space.

Said scientist mutters something under his breath, then comes back to Hermann.

“You down with 50/50 each?” Newton asks, waving a hand at the potential space around them, shadowed in back-up white lighting that is bouncing unpleasantly off his blackboards.

Hermann raises his eyebrows. “In what world would I not be ‘down’ with a perfectly logical split of the space?”

Newton rolls his eyes. “Just *checking*, man.”

They argue, then, over who’ll take which side. Eventually Newton pulls out his wallet –which is the same one he’s had the *entire time* they’ve worked together and is practically falling apart, honestly – and gets out a coin to flip. Hermann realises with a jolt that it is US currency. A *dime*. He hasn’t seen one of those for years.

Newton and his sentimental *affection* for things, good Lord. It used to annoy him horribly. Now he suspects that he might find it *sweet*. That he might even understand it.

He purses his lips and calls Heads, first, and wins. He chooses the left side. It isn’t that he necessarily preferred either, in fact, but the *principle* of the thing. One has to show dominance with Newton early, lest he think he has the run of any space. Or project. Or conversation.

Their assigned rooms are on the same floor as the lab, just a door away. Hermann cannot help but appreciate the logic of this, too, *obvious* as it may be. Barely a few moments down a short corridor and he reaches his own door - which is heavy, metallic, and closes with a spinning lock and nothing else, where others have had secondary security. No keycard sensor, no touch pad.

On closer examination, there looks to have been a fingerprint scanner on his door once, but it obviously malfunctioned long before, and has never been fixed. cursory observation of the other doors he sees around the rest of the base show that most have had them ripped off, or never even fitted. It would be fairly easy to break into any room, should you have enough impetus. Specific application of a crowbar and force, for example. It is an interesting observation; this Shatterdome may be bigger, but is somehow more *intimate*. The general design seems to be what Newton crudely nicknames an “End of the world military orgasm”, much moreso than the others he has been in.

How he *loves* his own nicknames. Hermann could point out again that he *does* have one for him, but Little Nuisance had not gone down well, the one time he’d slipped up and used it aloud, so he does not.

Years before, he would have felt uncomfortable at the prospect of little security, but now he is not so fussed. He feels mostly indifferent enough to anything but the work, and the person who might prevent him but *also* assist him most in doing it, and the background press and weight of the world, clamouring for answers. In truth the only person likely to barge into his room here is *Newton*, and he, unscrupulous as he may be, nevertheless seems to have *some* sort of respect for Hermann’s personal boundaries. He doesn’t touch Hermann nearly as often as others, for example.

Hermann could almost count on his fingers the number of times that he has, if 10.6 weren’t a difficult number to portray using *actual* digits.

On the first night, he gives up on attempting to bring some order to his room after less than twenty minutes, and sits onto his freshly made bed instead, sighing. He hooks one box with his cane and slides it closer, props his socked foot on it, and massages his thigh, considering the others still left to do.

It really is a little *sad*, he notices yet again, how little of his own things he keeps. Three boxes, now. How very extravagant. The radius of his life just overlaps with that of his career. Truly, he *does* practically live in his workspace, now. In his *work*. How many people in his past teased him about this very idea? *You’d sleep in the department if you could*, Vanessa laughed at him, once, at university. There have been too many others to keep track of, since, and before.

He wonders, idly, if it has been the same for Newton. Perhaps. Both of their lives have been slowly

reduced, shrinking to this very limited orbit. They have both worked so hard, for so long. Hermann might well be considering a trans-dimensional breach but he's not put down any *human* roots, as it were, in years, other than in this organisation. He doesn't own any property, other than a quarter share in his grandparent's old house in Wales. He's forgotten what items he had left in his Father's house.

It is not a place he'll be going back to soon, in any case.

Nor has his father been back for months, either.

Hermann decides to deal with the last boxes later, and gets up to limp to the sink and wash his face, brush his teeth. In all likelihood he will regret this decision when he wakes up to disorder, but the desire to make it just as neat as he'd *like* will keep him up for far too long, and though the time difference is small enough that jetlag is unlikely to raise its unwelcome head, he *wants* to be as refreshed as he can on his first day, as always.

By lunchtime the next day, though, he realises that this effort was wasted. Even with their rooms so close, Newton appears to have utterly given up on any sense of his own space, or *decorum*, and has immediately dumped practically all of his personal items in his side of the lab.

It is *littered*.

Up has gone a framed poster he'd normally had in his own room, a pile of books Hermann's only glimpsed previously in his quarters as well, toys on his desks, 'Mona' in a corner, what looks like a keyboard under a pile of papers, a plant on top of a filing cabinet that he thinks was Jessie's, and others. A few days in, he even turns up with most of a drum kit, plonking it down defiantly with a resonant crash. When Hermann glares, he simply throws a grin at him.

This is when he realises that there are *bongos* on top of it.

Four days before enforcing the line again is not bad.

Hermann paints it himself this time.

Fine.

At the end of their first full week Hermann has seen most of the base, but his remaining curiosity gets the better of him. They've eaten in the Mess, seen the enormous hanger that houses the Jaeger, met the Marshall and various members of the LOCCENT team, but he has not yet seen even *one* of the Wei triplets. Currently, he expects it to be at least nine or ten days before another kaiju attack, and he simply cannot wait that long to fulfil his curious wish to see the Technology department here.

"Right," he announces, mid-afternoon, getting up from his chair to stretch and reach for his cane. "I'm going to explore."

Newton is chewing the tip of his stylus as he reviews some notes. "You mean you're going to J-Tech, right?" he asks, without looking up.

"I. Have no *specific* destination in mind."

"Pff. Don't *lie*, Herms." Newton glances up, and points at him with the stylus, making Hermann recoil a little. The tip of the stylus is *shiny*. "I know you too well, fanboy. You wanna check out the Jaeger team, right. Maybe find out when the Weis will be home?"

He tries to hold an unimpressed stare, but Newton just gives him a soft, annoying sort of expression, and he sighs. “Oh fine, fine,” he snaps, re-clipping his badge to his jacket pocket to ensure that it is straight. “Are you coming?”

Newton, surprised, looks as though he might say yes, his mouth opening - then shakes his head. “No. Nah, I’m good. Like the lady said - they’re all the same, right?” He spreads his arms wide in a shrug, then turns back to his notes before Hermann can even answer him.

That. Is a *little* rude.

Hermann frowns at the back of his head, then goes.

The J-Science department is two floors above, and after a quick ascension in the lift Hermann exits the doors into the top half of a cavernous room. Immediately he is struck by the familiar noise: a background hum of electricity, fans, generators, and more, that takes him straight back to studying at TU.

The room is filled with lines of transparent touch screens, trailing cable like arteries across the floor and walls, holos depicting component parts of various Jaeger that he recognises (and some that he does not), and a smattering of techs bent over machinery. Below an observation deck is a testing area with, what seems to be at least half of Crimson Typhoon, but at perhaps one tenth of the size, currently spinning at a furious pace. Engineers and scientists bustle about in all corners, lit by the blue tinges of screens and LEDS.

Hermann slows his stride, taking it in, taking his glasses off. He makes his way down between a few of the desks, where on occasion, one or two scientists look up and nod, whilst another openly stares at him without stopping until he has passed. A little self-conscious, a little *more* irritated – he has every right to be there – it takes Hermann longer than it might normally have to notice the three almost identical figures, crowded around the observation desk together.

The Weis.

He straightens up a touch, and then keeps moving.

One of them is sitting on the console, a leg swinging, his body half twisted to look through the glass down to the model, whilst his brother leans over his shoulder to watch as well. The third is sitting at the desk, his chin planted in his hand, an elbow on the surface. They are all wearing red overalls, variously buttoned or tied at the waist over t-shirts, and all look oddly...bored.

The seated man presses a button on the desk and says something, quickly, in Cantonese, Hermann thinks – his is rusty, it could just as easily be Mandarin? The reply from an engineer below comes back after a click of the speaker system, and one of his brothers elbows him, sharply, mutters something back, and then they all laugh.

Hermann waits until the lights below change to green, and the triplets all slump back, before carefully clearing his throat.

As one, they all turn to him, in a smooth, fast movement that speaks of reflex and response in an extremely *clear* way.

“Hello,” he says, first, and nods his head slowly, and respectfully. “I wanted to introduce myself. I am—”

“Dr. Gottlieb, yes?” The brother that was sitting on the console hops down, whilst the others stand up next to him, and Hermann blinks.

“Oh. Yes.” He needn’t ask how they know; there isn’t anyone else on this base with a cane, he supposes.

“Hu,” one of the men laughs, and elbows the brother that Hermann notes is *ever* so slightly taller than his siblings once again. “Stay calm, now.”

He – *Hu* – scowls at his brother, then crosses over to Hermann and unexpectedly holds out a hand to shake his.

“Hello. I am Hu. Please meet Cheung,” - he gestures over his shoulder to the brother who is laughing at him, “and Jin.” Hermann, startled, only manages a weak handshake, squeezing back just as Hu releases his hand. He tries to give the other two a much better one.

“I’m pleased to meet you all.”

“Not as pleased as Hu,” Jin says, shaking his hand last, then leaning back against the counter and folding his arms, a small smile playing on his lips. “He is a big fan of you.”

When Hermann glances over, surprised, Hu shrugs, easily. “Your original Jaeger code. So very cool. I recognised you from the article.”

“Article?” he asks – then remembers. “Oh! Goodness. That was...a long time ago.”

“We were in the Academy.” Cheung, re-buttoning a pocket on his overalls, grins at Hermann as he sits down on the console next to his brother. “Hu made it required reading for us, of course.”

“Well.” Hermann glances at Hu, who is good-naturedly muttering under his breath, a little stunned, but *pleased*. “I must say that I, in turn, have been most impressed by all of your modification suggestions for your Jaeger. The 360 degree matrix is truly impressive – *particularly* when balanced with the thrust kickers. Who worked up the coding?”

“Some was us, some was them,” Jin answers, gesturing to the workers in the room around them vaguely.

Hermann nods again. “Spectacular.”

The brothers all grin at him, as one. Cheung and Jin exchange high fives, and Hu gives him a neat, polite bow.

“Thank you,” he says. “Dr. Lightcap came up with something great for us, but it wasn’t *perfect*.”

“We like perfect,” Cheung clarifies.

“Of course,” Hermann agrees. The brothers are amused, having fun, but there is a severity underneath that he can recognise. “Nothing less will do, nowadays.”

A beat of silence. Something behind them beeps twice, urgently, and an analyst in the corner hisses in frustration; another passes between them with a steaming mug of something. Hu, suddenly, lunges for a chair and drags it over to them.

“Would you like to sit?” he asks.

Hermann shakes his head once, pressing the head of his cane flat against his palm and staying where he is. “No, thank you. I am perfectly fine.”

Hu glances at Jin, then back. “Okay,” he agrees, and sits in the chair instead. Hermann’s lips

quirk. Cheung puts one of his boots on the arm of it, and Hu gives Hermann a long suffering look that he feels, deeply. *Brothers*.

“If you have some time,” Jin pipes up, still considering Hermann with his arms folded, “we would like to ask you about your predictions? The next kaiju will be soon, you say.”

This Hermann knows, too. He lifts his chin. “Yes. Based on the last three months, I expect it in no more than 11 days.”

Hu nods. “That is what the last briefing said, but can *you* be more specific?”

“Location, perhaps?” Jin adds.

“It is our birthday on Sunday, we would like to get through that with no...surprises,” Cheung says, when Hermann narrows his eyes.

He takes a sharp breath. “My last update set it as a 98.3% certainty that we would not see one before the end of the year. In *fact*, based upon my most recent calculations this week, I expect it between the 30th and the 2nd, and to target somewhere in the East or South Chinese seas - but the PPDC prefer to keep things more...general, than I would prefer. ‘Just in case’,” he paraphrases, resisting a strong and uncharacteristic desire to use quotation marks.

His manner may be a little clipped – he has never enjoyed having his maths *questioned* - but his certainty seems to appease the brothers, who look at each other again.

“I would definitely trust him over anyone else,” Hu says after a moment, in English, clearly for Hermann’s benefit, pointing at him as the three of them seem to communicate silently for a second. Which is utterly impossible, of course, but Drifts do have that way of *lingering*, Hermann has read, even if it is ‘all in the mind’ and does not hold up to study. Not that anyone has had much time to fully look into it as much as *he* would expect. Perhaps post-kaiju.

The concept of the overlap between siblings like this is fascinating. It’s already been seen what it can do in the Jaeger, and *how* Hermann wishes he could have been involved in the programming for Crimson Typhoon. The mechanical possibility from *triplets* connecting their brains to the same interface, alone... There had been plenty enough speculation over mental communication between twins and triplets, let alone *identical* partnerships, even *before* the kaiju came and Jaeger were created. The biological implications of neural handshakes, before such a thing existed. Of mental *partnership*, in such a way...

Newton probably did a study on it at some point during *one* of his degrees, Hermann thinks, with resignation.

He sighs to himself, quietly, just as the brothers seem to come to an agreement.

“Cool.” Cheung turns to him with a shrug. “We trust you.”

“Another party we can make it to, then!” Hu says, and pumps a fist.

“That...is one way to put it,” Hermann says, carefully edging a step to the chair next to him, just a little, to lean and take the weight off his foot. He has been holding himself too upright, through admiration and then irritation, he must *relax*.

Jin barks one short laugh. “Dr. Gottlieb. We are *Pilots*.”

“We have always been living on borrowed time,” Cheung says.

“But better this than out there,” Hu adds - meaning, presumably, the street. “Always better this.”

“We were born to be fighters.” Jin grins, suddenly, at his brothers. It is mostly teeth. “We were meant to be. We do nothing better.”

In answer, Hu lifts and flexes his – admittedly impressive - biceps, then laughs at the range of unimpressed expressions around him, particularly Hermann’s, his head tipping back against Cheung’s thigh.

“How wonderful,” Hermann says, rolling his eyes, “male posturing is alive and well, I see.”

Cheung chuckles – then blinks and leans forwards suddenly, putting a hand flat on Hu’s forehead to lean on.

“*Hèi!*” he says, ignoring his brother’s protests. “Wait. You work with that scientist Geiszler?” he asks.

Jin huffs something sharp under his breath, and Hu makes a sound of derision, squirming out of reach to look at Hermann.

“Yes! With kaiju tattoos?”

Ah.

Hermann pauses, momentarily, the muscles around his spine tensing. “Yes. I do. He—” A tech squeezes past him in a hurry, nearly bumping into him, and Hermann glares after the man, then turns to hook his cane on the back of the empty chair as he thinks what to say, feeling the triplets’ eyes on his back. “Newton is very passionate. He...takes his work extremely seriously.”

“*Yeah,*” Jin says, sceptically, and Hermann purses his lips.

“He is the world’s foremost expert on the kaiju.”

“Sure.” Cheung scratches his ribs idly, tapping the boot that is still up on the arm of his brother’s chair as he thinks. “But also weird, yes?”

Hermann puts his hands in his pockets, where he lets them curl into fists, but keeps his expression flat, unreadable. “That is one word you could choose. Another would be ‘brilliant’. *Another* would be ‘insane’. I have many I like to use. As do everyone who meets him. All are accurate, of course,” he finishes, with a slight joke. Always best to keep things light – and Hu laughs, whilst Heung snorts to himself. Humour is the easiest defence he can offer.

Jin, however, continues to consider Hermann, then finally tilts his head. “I suppose you have to love what you do,” he acquiesces. “I cannot deny that *we* love it.”

“Nope,” Hu says, pointing at his brother in agreement. “*You* cannot.”

“I am sure our tattoo is better, though,” Cheung chimes in, cracking a grin.

“Your—?” Hermann asks, before *thinking*, then tries to stop – but too late, Hu and Cheung are already pulling up their t-shirts to show off the dragon symbol Hermann has already seen all over the city. One etched over Hu’s heart, the other on Cheung’s hip.

Behind him, a programmer inhales so quickly that it *whistles* and, when they all glance at her, spins away, panics, and sinks, slowly, underneath her console to cough.

“Wonderful,” Hermann says, weakly, amused, turning back. “*Please* put those away.”

Jin snorts again, getting up, and claps him on the shoulder hard. “We have to go, now. Training,” he says, glancing back at his brothers, who nod and get up. “But it was a pleasure to meet you,” he continues, and then grins again at Hermann. “I will leave you to guessing where mine is.”

“*No*, thank you,” he says, shortly.

The brothers laugh, and leave – Hu shakes his hand, again on the way – and then Hermann spends another half an hour in the lab, looking over the recent coding, peering down at the model on the testing floor with its exposed machinery. Getting lost in the hum of machines and the endless data around him.

The next kaiju does not come until the 2nd January, after the triplets’ birthday, as Hermann had predicted.

It *attacks* Shanghai, however, which seems unfair. The Weis are a flurry of action as they defend their hometown, and Hermann watches the feed in the mess hall this time, he and Newton surrounded by a good chunk of the rest of the departments.

Newton is agitated today, bouncing on the balls of his feet half as much because he *can* as because he’s trying to see over everyone’s heads.

“Fuck this,” he snaps, after 10 minutes, and elbows and climbs his way up onto the long, metallic bench next to them – a bench that they are supposed to *eat* off of.

A number of others are already on them, but that is not the *point*.

“*Why* must you always insist on standing on furniture?” Hermann hisses to him, desperately, looking up at the unusual angle of the underside of Newton’s jaw, and noticing a whorl in his beard stubble that he’s never noticed before, something swirling, like a complicated flying formation.

Newton glances down and interrupts his observations. “Whine all you like, you *know* you’re going to end up here eventually,” he says, with a fairly *evil* little expression - then gets distracted yelling at the off-duty LOCCENT officer next to him who just stamped on his toes.

Hermann sighs, and resists. Eventually, though, yes, the crowd becomes even more intolerable. He tutts to himself, and then turns and pokes Newton in the calf.

“Help me up,” he insists, when Newton starts in surprise and then reaches for him, taking his elbow as he gets a foot on the long bench seat, then lunges up, thankful, for once, for his long legs. Once he has found his footing, pressed in close against his colleague, Newton lets go quickly - but watches him shuffling his feet to ensure the stability, his brogues slipping on the polished surface. He glares sideways at Newton, to let him *know* that he sees him, and hopes intently that he is not going to go pink.

“Do not say *anything*,” he warns. Then knocks the back of the man in front’s ankle with his cane to let him know that *he* is there, and to kindly refrain from stepping back onto him *again*, thank you.

“...My lips are sealed. Stapled, even. Silent as a watery grave,” Newton says, with predictable *dramatics* that make them both pause, uncomfortable. Too large a number of Pilots have died in the last six months alone.

Newton swivels back to stare at the screen before Hermann can berate him, and so he chooses, silently, not to.

Weeks pass, punctuated with two reoccurrences: kaiju, and arguments with Newton. This base is not as busy as the city, but operates incessantly - Hermann sees more of the same faces on what should be new shifts, rather than changing personnel.

A kaiju comes again in February, then at the beginning of April, mere days after Hermann gets a phonecall from a soft-voiced Vanessa to explain their odd *absentia* from communication had been as recovery, as she had miscarried a baby she hadn't even known she was carrying a few weeks before.

She is fine, now. It was early, and it wasn't even planned. *They're* fine. Hermann is...not. Karla is pregnant too, extremely and *stupidly* pregnant at this stage, this dangerous *time*, and at Vanessa's quiet tones he has a wash of terrible panic and sorrow that makes his throat utterly close, and all he can manage is to say *Oh* and then call her '—nessa. That makes her laugh a little, at least, as well as causing Newton to look across the lab at the noise he has made.

Hermann ends the call terribly, unable to say much at all, then covers his eyes with a hand briefly, just as Newton crosses over to touch his arm in concern. To squeeze his arm, when he haltingly explains - then, after a silence, put a whole hand on his shoulder and rub it, briskly, awkwardly, just up and down once, before darting off when Hermann looks up. He promises suddenly and loudly to get something helpful.

"Tea's good, right?" he shouts over his shoudler. "Tea, tea..." He disappears into a cupboard, muttering, and soon returns.

It is an awful cup, particularly for Newton, who has always been frustratingly and wonderfully good at meeting Hermann's preferences. *Far* too weak. Still, he's grateful. His hands shake for almost an hour, and he clinks the cup against his teeth on his first gulp, but it helps.

For a couple of days, then, he experiences what he can only describe as abject, lingering *terror*. Newton hovers, hands in his pockets, slides a chair over later fast enough that he knocks into Hermann and irritates him, and finally turns up quietly, scuffling about outside the somewhat fish-eyed peephole to his room at 12.30am two days later. He has a bottle of Harold's distillations that he had, apparently, smuggled onto the plane, and in the midst of leaving it on the step.

Hermann opens the door.

"Come in, Newton," he says, in an exhale, looking down at Newton with his glasses on the end of his nose.

Newton starts in surprise, and straightens up. He's obviously halfway to bed; his laces are undone and he's in a t-shirt so faded that Hermann can no longer identify any logo on the front, but knows it is the one with a loose neckline that he usually sleeps in.

He looks confused, the bottle still held in his hand. "I...meant this was for you, rather than *us*," he says, haltingly.

Hermann waves a hand. "I don't care. Stop hovering and come *in* before I change my mind, will you?" he says.

Newton's eyes widen, then crinkle in amusement. "*Loving* this attitude, dude."

"Thank you."

He pads in, a little self-consciously, glancing around until Hermann shuts the door. Then they share half of the bottle, Hermann sitting on his bed in his socks, Newton sitting at his desk with the chair

tipped back on its two hind legs, his feet propped on Hermann's sink.

The *irony* of he, who has been twitchy and manic most of the month and whom Hermann had walked in on dry-swallowing a pill a few days before from a bottle taken out of the fridge that he normally keeps chemical samples in, a bottle that Hermann did not need to see close up to know the purpose of, attempting to... 'Console' is the wrong word, nothing has happened to *him* - but to show quiet *solidarity*, is not lost on Hermann.

It works, either way, so he decides not to question it.

The next day, after stumbling off to his own room around 2am, Newton is annoyingly bright and normal, or as close to as passes. Whereas *Hermann* has a headache right between his eyes.

Damn *Harold*.

Fairly soon, Newton crosses the line again to stare at Hermann's blackboards with his arms folded, then to imperiously demand that he explain every single one of the formulas on the right-hand one. It is a transparent attempt at distraction, as has been everything. Hermann knows that he probably has at least a very *good* idea of them already. Even so, he is so grateful. Actually he would much rather like to press his face into the nape of Newton's neck and close his eyes, just for a moment, have a smaller arm wrap around his shoulders and just breathe in, feel him solid and warm and *tangible*. Instead, he sighs, taps a particular Venn diagram with his cane and sets about pointing out how *obvious* it is, surely?

They are arguing within 12 minutes.

Wonderful.

Karla has a baby boy in May. Hermann's throat closes up again when Dietrich chatters excitedly down the phone to him about it all, and at first he thinks, bizarrely, imagining the flutter around his larynx, of the breach, wishing its structure would fold together so easily at the mercy of so small and vulnerable a thing.

They call him Phillip, and give him Hermann's name as a middle name. This earns him another phone call, in which Bastien laments the blatant *favouritism*, but ends up talking about the size of the baby's *fingernails* for a good twenty minutes, so it cannot be all bad.

A kaiju comes again at the very end of June, and another right at beginning of July. Never an exact space of time between them. Hermann traces back, plots forward, works furiously on averages, and Newton continues to fidget and flit around the lab, draw up long-winded comparisons between samples, and to *talk* to himself about DNA. Hermann will not put up the constant dictation for much longer. Nor: Newton interrupting him, singing off-kilter, singing too *well*, dancing terribly, drumming on the work-surfaces/sample tanks/his thighs, arguing with Hermann over the *function* of kaiju rather than the weaknesses, which is far more *relevant*, and staying in the lab through a horrible cold even though he is dribbling snot all over his wrist cuffs and refusing, as he always does, to take any form of medication lest it affect his "unique and tenuous and badass chemical cocktail" any further.

Which, *oh*, Hermann *could* discuss the ridiculousness and danger of with him at length – but he cannot be bothered. He has his own distractions. He keeps remembering something that the triplets had said to him, every time they pass the three men in the Mess hall and Hu waves, the others nodding.

Newton, who they have now met, considered, and apparently decided to blithely misunderstand but

accept, likes to tease Hermann about having favourites as well. Little does he bloody *know*.

The problem is that it is their *perspective* that traps his thoughts. The triplets are so convinced that they were meant to fight. Was Hermann *meant* to be here?

He has always felt there ought to be some design, if not *exact* plan; he cannot full accept Determinism, that anyone is truly in control of his own life other than himself, but that there is an...influence? Yes. A *suggestion*. Aschematic, to be built upon through choice. He made an attempt long before, a young, silly attempt, and then chosen to see resultant events in such a way so as not to take any more action – and, believed that to be right, for it had led him to the most satisfying, frustrating, wonderfully complex working relationship of his life. Yet here he *still* is. *Years* later.

Still with Newton. *Close* to Newton. Hermann still wants him; of *course* he does. It has become so constant that he can no longer pinpoint the moment begrudging admiration and attraction turned to true wanting, turned to unexpected partnership, turned to *this* bizarre state. He is utterly unsure of what he thinks anymore, deviating from one thing to another. He cannot make any *choice*. Newton is the most infuriating man on the planet. Newton has *no sense of propriety*. Newton is so gifted it makes him marvel. Newton is beautiful. Newton is the best friend that he has *ever* had.

Hermann has never been a fan of uncertainty, as a rule, no. Nor of *decision* making. Did he use faith as justification for his own deliberation? Conversely, were one to look at everything using faith alone as explanation, surely one would have to look at the fact that they are still *here* as a sign? *Hermann. Get your head out of your work and maybe have a conversation?* Newton winds him up, hitting the right spots, all irrational, emotional, and *correct*.

He comes to work one day to find that the power cable for his kettle has been ceremoniously and perfectly removed, and replaced with a knotted line of *string* that runs all the way around every desk and chair leg in the room, and takes him the best part of the morning to unravel. Newton watches, headphones on, a horrible grin on his face that Hermann wishes to wipe off. All because he had *dared* to suggest that Newton might want to consider undertaking a seventh degree in basic hygiene in a lab setting, and, when Newton had countered that Hermann might wish to consider one in basic *personality*, blindly thrown the first thing he could reach at him. This had happened to be one of Newton's bongo drums.

Hermann had only *slightly* scuffed the edge. Newton is overreacting. He had also regretted it, later, but nevertheless the uneven *energy* remains between them. The two of them are *waiting*, once again. Expecting something. It is not like Sydney, nothing so loaded with anticipation - more with *dread*, now, at the speed of the kaiju, the strength, the mounting losses to the PPDC and damage to the world.

Hermann is *missing* something. As if he is standing in the Breach, down in its well-like structure with water rising towards his chest, as the kaiju come more frequently. He feels the pressure as a physical *thing*. He considers the data, he forgets yet again to eat, he ignores Newton just to wind him up further.

He can feel Newton's eyes on him on occasion, and not in the way he wants, as he works. They continue to orbit one *another*, drawing in close for a discussion or an argument, or turning their backs on one another and pulling away, in a strange form of magnetism and repellance. Newton *is* the definition of magnetic. People are either drawn to him, or wish to have nothing to do with him. Hermann cannot quantify how he feels. Both. Neither. And if Newton continues to move away from Hermann - if they go ahead and close the breach and then Newton just *moves back to America* and leaves him, Hermann will be... Well. *Unimpressed*. What would *happen*?

If. *If*. Always these questions in his life he cannot find the answer for, or decide upon. What he wouldn't give to *know* what is a sign, and not to potentially misread it, or invent his own. To question himself years later.

He does not know how to act, merely how to *react*. Newton pushes; he reacts. He pushes back, and Newton does, predictably, the same. This he knows. Normality has become this, and he needs it, because the kaiju are coming closer and closer and he is starting to see that the distance between kaiju attacks are closing, fluctuating. He is starting to build a theory and he does not wish to be correct.

August; Taipei, then New Zealand. Somehow a piano ends up in their lab in the same month. Hermann just ensures it is on Newton's side, and doesn't rise to it. He expects two attacks in September, and he is right - one in Queen Charlotte Sound, then just two weeks later in Brisbane. Communication from the PPDC comes in waves of too much, then none at all. Finally, they hear that an emergency conference of the UN, the PPDC and relevant world leaders is being called for early October.

"The money's running out," Newton says in his ear, startling him at his screen; he had not heard him come over. He takes his glasses off as Newton looks at him through his own, head tilted, his mouth soft, his hands unusually still.

He looks tired, today.

Hermann blows on the lenses of his glasses, then gets a handkerchief out of his pocket to rub them clean with, so that he has something to do with his fingers.

"Yes," he agrees. "I know."

The ruling, after the conference, to close all Shatterdomes but Hong Kong and divert the remaining funds to the Wall, surprises some, but not them, particularly. The same day, they eat the quietest breakfast in the Mess that Hermann has ever experienced. It is so hushed that he can hear Newton's boots squeaking as he bounces one knee, slumped over his cereal, his eyes fixed on the table and his thoughts *obviously* elsewhere. People are still reeling - or already packing to leave.

The two of them do not speak either, for perhaps the longest single stretch that they ever have managed. They had simply met in the hallway outside their rooms before, tablets in hand, after getting the news, and made their way here.

"Well, *fuck*," Newton says eventually, and suddenly straightens up, licks the back of his spoon, and twists to look at Hermann. "At least we don't have to move again, right?" He nudges Hermann with a shoulder, rousingly.

Hermann takes a breath and smiles at him, because he *wants* to, then gathers himself and nods, once.

"Yes. Yes. My thoughts exactly."

"So done with packing." Newton is nodding as well, now, grinning a little.

"You do not *pack*," he sniffs, "you throw things in the vague direction of a box and hope that gravity does the rest for you."

"Works, though."

He snorts. "Well, thank goodness you won't be doing it again."

No discussion needed. As if they would *leave*.

That decision was easy. Hopefully they will not live to regret it. Hopefully, he amends, they will live. The kaiju are coming more often, the Shatterdome is about to get *extremely* crowded, and there is still much to do.

Chapter End Notes

Edit: It's been brought to my attention that Vanessa not having a baby is apparently a creepy trope, which I was not aware of - she hasn't been in any of the fics I've read and I don't actively read much anymore as I'm just writing in my free time instead!

I therefore want to add some clarification. I worked with kids and parents for years, during which time I learned how common miscarriages really are, and was so surprised because it doesn't get talked about; I had had no idea. It is something I wanted to have in the fic because in reality things don't always go perfectly, which is the shit truth of it. I did agonise over it for a long time, though (hence delay) and it is not something I took lightly. This chapter was originally longer but has been cut, also partly because it was so delayed and I had a really hard time with this one - another mention of Vanessa would have been in it, but has now been moved. So please rest assured that it will be resolved in the next part, it is not the end, and I am a silly storywriting twat but I am not enough of a twat to needlessly fridge a baby, but rather to show something that I experienced, so I sincerely hope that's not the impression given. X

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay on this one, everyone, RL was fairly distracting as I moved countries! Happy Christmas/New Year, and thanks so much again to everyone who's sticking with this.

Also, I have to acknowledge Sanna's influence on the poker, after an amazing pic that she drew would obviously not leave my mind. BLAME HER. Lovely whore <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

[Oct 2024]

Newt's dad calls him the same day they announce the dome closures.

After quick but careful evaluation of the situation over his should-be-worryingly-but-he's-past-caring beige 'cereal', Newt had decided it was pretty fucking likely that the PPDC would try and reclaim some of their equipment now that it is shutting down. Before he could give voice to this suspicion, though, Hermann had had the same idea – only he'd insisted that they go directly to the lab.

Before even finishing breakfast.

Newt thinks it could possibly have waited another 10 *minutes*, you know, *but* he'd agreed to go straight there, even though it's 5am, because Newt, as he realised last year, is possibly going to secretly be Hermann's bitch for the rest of his life, and be ultimately okay with that.

Is it the worst thing he's ever come to understand about himself? Maybe. He's been arguing with *himself* on the topic of Hermann since the end of last year and it's pretty draining, though, so nope. Not today. Absolutely *not* going to argue about whether or not his last mouthful of mostly artificial food has more value than Hermann's paranoia, not right now. A man has to pick his battles.

Pick his *side*.

People are already milling about the corridors. Discussing the announcement, arguing, trying to work out what to do. A sort of *lost* feeling is palpable. Some people are packing already, and it's not like enough haven't left over the last year, as the cuts got tighter and the losses started to pile up. Others still are furiously trying to convince those first ones *not* to go - and then there's a *third* group, one that seems to be made up of everyone who has decided to double their efforts in a sort of bullish Screw You Guys. These people are starting shifts before they're even rostered, switching over into areas they don't normally work; as they pass one group on their way to the lab, Newt is sure that *that* dude now debating sonar with a LOCCENT team is usually out on the heli pad directing flights, right?

From the bemused look on Hermann's face, he thinks the same thing.

Unsurprisingly, Newt likes this third group the best. Team Fuck It, he nicknames them in his head.

It's a way of thinking he is *here* for. *They're* here for, in fact. He and Hermann.

No questions asked or even *needed* between them. No discussion. They've chosen their place, exactly. They chose it years ago.

Damn, dedication to a cause is so *attractive*. Newt's probably looking pretty good right now.

As is Hermann, as he strides ahead.

Fuck's *sake*.

He's all swinging action, though; all last-gasp *motivation*. Normally Newt would be matching pace with him but when he gets going like this, damn, even with his cane he's all long legs and pivotal force. Newt can't really keep up. Or maybe he chooses not to try too hard because he likes the view. Life is depressing enough now that he'll take the opportunity if it presents itself, hey.

Flexes itself.

As if on cue, Newt's tablet starts beeping at him from his own back pocket, just as the lab comes into sight. He slows down to get it out, and by the time he yanks it free, skinning a knuckle for his trouble on a pocket stud, he's lost Hermann. Which means that he's the only one to notice the service elevator doors glide open as he's passing.

A sobbing noise makes him glance inside, automatically. Then he wishes he hadn't. Two women are pressed against each other in the corner, arguing without words.

One of them, her back to the doors, is holding the other's face in both hands so that she can kiss her, again, again, between tears he can hear. The expression he can see on the taller woman's face is painful enough; the other is just a sheen of black hair but he can *imagine* what she must look like, what she must be saying, as he gets out of there as quickly as possible, rushing off towards the lab.

He recognised them. That's even *worse*. They're both on the J-tech crew and he's seen them around the dome frequently. The woman with her back to him is local, he remembers, she's got a scar on her lower lip and works in coding, but the other woman came with them from Sydney. He'd seen her on the engineering crew when he'd gone to visit Jessie, laughing, throwing a roll of solder over their heads to another colleague. Last week, in an exhausted collapse across the bench seating in the mess hall with her head in her partner's lap, the other idly finger-combing her hair out of its braid as she slept. He doesn't even know their *names*, yet he's ended up being privy to this totally private moment between them, now that she's crying in an elevator, hissing angrily under her breath as her girlfriend kisses her, trying to be soothing, pushing her up against the wall.

Trying to *keep* her there.

At least, Newt thinks, after he rounds the corner into the lab feeling totally fucking unsettled and *sad* – shit, at least he and Hermann were in agreement. They didn't have to argue about it like *that*.

Aaaaand then he thinks how he's just compared them to this *actual couple* and gets this swift stab, right in the gut. Nice. *Nice*. Thanks, brain.

His tablet is beeping urgently by the time he sits down, throwing it onto the surface next to him. He answers it distractedly, already pulling up the encryption he's got on his own files, jabbing a button to put it on speaker and trying to get onto thinking about something *else*.

"Yeah?" he says, vaguely, not even looking at the caller name.

“Son?” his dad asks, as he starts double-checking passwords. “Kommst Du nach Hause?”

Newt stops in astonishment, turning to stare at the small screen. There’s no image of the caller, but he can picture it, and his dad sounds...bad.

“What?” he asks, stupidly. There’s a scuffling sound, and then it’s his mom coming through.

“Newt? Darling, we saw the— The *news*. Are you...coming home?”

He doesn’t know what to say, for a second. He glances at Hermann, who’s not even *trying* to make like he’s busy this time and is frowning across the lab at him. Newt works his jaw, no sound coming out, until finally he gathers a big breath to answer - and then he just. Lets *loose*.

“Are you *fucking serious*?” he says, turning back towards his tablet, and maybe his voice goes a little rough but ‘Team Fuck It’, yeah. “You. You actually think I’m just gonna *leave*?”

His mom makes a soothing sound. “Of course we’re not *expecting*, we just—”

“No no *no*, guys,” he interrupts. “You really don’t get to call at ass-fuck o clock to double-check my convictions, not cool.”

“*We’re*—”

He *snarls*, and hits the desk with his fist, making his tablet jump. Hermann flinches as well. Whatever. *Fuck*. “What the *shit*, do you not *remember* those six degrees I’ve got? You knowby nowI’m not leaving this alone until it’s *done*, right? I mean you should really have gotten that by now, I’m *sorry* if you haven’t but—”

“Newt—” His dad starts, but he just carries on. He’s yelling now, sure, but its fully fucking *warranted* here.

“I mean. Come *on*! This is a *surprise* to you? *Really*? You do know this is all exactly the same as it was yesterday? And lastyear - and last *decade*? I’m still here, I’m still going to categorise the kaiju, I’m still going to save the world, I am gonna get some global damn recognition and I *won’t* need to be worrying that there’ll be no one to buy my album when I eventually get it out because they’ll all be dead or halfway to being there. I’m not coming home, this *is* home, I’m— I’m going to finish this. I want. I want to hold my godson for more than 10 fucking minutes and really this is what I’m *doing*? This is what I’ve *been* doing for 8 years? Along with. Uh. Ha. Not murdering Hermann,” he adds, sort of trailing off a bit, losing steam as he looks over at his colleague, who he couldn’t leave out, no, and sees him all big eyes and a frozen sort of shock, watching Newt.

Though he still manages to go *pinched* and roll his eyes a little, right on cue, thank you. That helps. Newt was worried his voice was going to go a little shaky there. Instead, he manages to stay clipped at the end, breezy, bright.

“So!” he finishes. “Maybeyou should catch up? Because. You’re going to have to fucking like it either way.”

Once he’s actually stopped, he realises that they aren’t replying.

Just *silence*, and the weight of it.

Oh.

He pushes his glasses back up his nose, carefully, and thinks about saying something else - then

his mom starts laughing.

Laughing.

What the fuck.

“Is this funny?” he hisses. “Is it?!”

“Don’t snap,” his dad says, though it lacks effect as well because he’s also sounding pretty tickled too, in a brittle sort of way, and that stops Newt’s rant before he can fully form it. “*Newton*,” his dad continues, his voice soberingly soft, “we. We *thought* as much.”

“We just wanted to give you the chance to decide not to, if you wanted to stop,” his mom says, and Newt just slumps, staring at his tablet like a someone’s just sliced his spinal column in two. *Oh*. He was so ready for a fight there. He was so sure they’d have lost faith in him by now. That they wouldn’t. Wouldn’t *know*—

“Oops.” He breathes. Thinks about it. “Okay. ...Cool.”

“We’re still so very proud of you,” his mom adds, suddenly all whispery, and fuck no, *no* to the wobbly voice; Newt *cannot* deal with that right now. He tries not to look over at Hermann again as he snatches his tablet up to speak close to it.

“Guys, really, *Danke* and all,” he says, under his breath, his back to the rest of the room, “but could we not right now?”

“Busy?” his dad suggests, quietly.

Newt wants to laugh until he *cries*.

“Just a bit.”

He hangs up, after they agree.

Hermann says nothing to Newt about it. He acts as if he hadn’t heard a thing, even though he’d been staring at Newt throughout, just continues working, scribbling. The only way Newt can tell that he’s flustered at all is that he tutts and scrubs an equation off the board with heel of one hand, rather than a cloth.

About 10 minutes later he clears his throat, and crosses over the line to come and glare pointedly at him.

“Have you built a double layer of encryption on your files, or are you still relying on just *one*?” he asks.

Newt stares at him for what is probably too long, gratefully, openly and what he hopes is not too obviously and vulnerably *hungrily*, then shakes his head.

“I, uh. Think one will be fine.” He pushes his glasses back up his nose. “I do *know* what I’m doing, man. I’m pretty sure I was a tech geek *before* you were,” he scowls.

“Oh, *please*,” Hermann replies. When Newt doesn’t answer, just raises his eyebrows, he prods him in the shoulder and flaps his hands pointedly until Newt sighs and gets out of his chair, at which point he steals it, and takes over. As if that *wasn’t* what Newt was hoping he’d be able to get him to do. And as if he wasn’t fully aware of that.

The next day, Hermann gets his own call, though this one he takes privately. When he comes back from his room he's all suspiciously, lingeringly pink on his cheeks, and when he crosses carefully over the line, ostensibly so he can glare about the sample Newt's working on perilously close to it, his eyelashes which are gorgeous enough on a normal day to make Newt hate him and *love* him a little bit are clumped together oddly, which Newt sees when he turns where he's standing to watch him. He leans a hip against his sample table and watches him - and maybe Hermann *knows* that he sees. Maybe Hermann *wants* him to see. He picks up something on his desk, puts it back down, glances over, glances away, fucking *drifts* back towards his own side, and he obviously has *something* he wants to talk about but isn't bringing it up, and wants Newt to find some roundabout way of doing so.

Well, fuck that. Newt isn't going to beat around the bush anymore. He's tired. Working towards honesty, right.

He's going to *incinerate* the bush.

"Dude, you are not fooling anyone. Do I have to annoy you until you tell me, or what?"

Hermann gapes at him, for a second, then scowls, even though he sort of *blushes*, too, all caught and adorable.

"I..." Hermann goes into his explaining stance, all rigid-spine and chin up, and Newt works extremely hard not to find it appealing. "That was Vanessa," he explains, and oh, well, there's the turn-off. Newt straightens up quickly, dread a sticky thing in the pit of his stomach.

"She ok?"

"She is *pregnant*. Again." Hermann flashes him a smile, a dazed, wide-eyed sort, tremulous and uncertain in a way that really *hurts* Newt, then shakes his head and explains that they've waited until she has passed the 3 months stage to let anyone know. Obviously, Newt thinks. Wise move. She's due in the next year and Hermann looks like he doesn't quite know what to do with himself, now.

"Damn foolish time to think about children, of course," he finishes, tapping his fingers on the back of his chair thoughtfully. Very close to the line. Still not really convincing *anyone* but himself. Newt just huffs, and turns to peel off his gloves, drop them on the side, so that he can pat him on the shoulder as he gets up and crosses towards the kitchen.

"Yeah, well. When isn't. People are going to keep having babies, that's just how it goes. You can't stop it." He pauses, turns back and quotes, dramatically. "Life...finds a way."

Hermann narrows his eyes at Newton, over the top of his glasses, as if he *suspects* something, but isn't sure what. Newt just throws him a grin, then makes himself a coffee and a herbal tea for Hermann.

Personnel depart over the next few days in depressing *droves*. Last minute alterations and repairs begin by the staff that are staying, meaning that parts of the 'dome start looking like the aftermath of battles - even more than they previously did, anyway. There are definitely parts of this place that could have been rusty since they were *built*.

Newt has always kinda liked that about it.

At first it's obvious that people are missing, and then that there are too *many* people, when new arrivals start turning up unannounced. Rooms are soon overflowing, staff having to double-up in

some quarters, others getting lost, shouldering strange workloads, and not caring, everyone throwing themselves into work. Any work. No-one comes to the K-Science department though.

Nice.

New faces, oldfaces. It's like a really drawn out, weird party. Their Marshall steps down at the end of that first week, having lost his job, as have all of them – except for Stacker *Pentecost*, who they are told is coming to run Hong Kong.

"Huh. Props might be due, here," Newt has to admit, watching the feed of a quick announcement Pentecost's had shakily filmed and sent ahead of his arrival to everyone at the dome, in which he clarifies, steadily, that they will continue to work for as long as they can and that he appreciates every one of their sacrifices and dedication. "That dude is unstoppable."

"Indeed, his attitude is most impressive," Hermann agrees, heading back towards his blackboards, and Newt eyes him across the room, after a second. Was that... Is he observing, or *enjoying*?

"Kinda exciting, I guess, if you're into the apocalypse," he suggests. Hermann just *hmms* and reaches for another piece of chalk.

Right. Yeah.

I love you, Newt thinks, staring at the back of his head, which is a new thing he's become prone to doing; just...testing it out. Hermann continues to look at his equations for a moment, touches his mouth in thought, then starts scribbling.

Gotcha.

Newt turns back to his own work.

So there's the thing. And the thing is. The *thing*. Is. That Newt was going to *do* it. Something. He really was. What exactly, he didn't know; just going to roll with inspiration and adrenaline. His gut. Brain. Which has been *screaming* at him for months to say something. But say *what*? Words are complicated. Hermann doesn't really *go* for speeches and declarations.

How do you say something like this to a guy with very little trust in linguistics? *Hey man, so, you know that thing where we hate each other most days but also don't? Turns out at some point I lost my mind totally because actually I fucking love you, dude.* Nope. Maybe, *I think you're the one. The **one** one one. You have to be. The quantifier. The single thing.* He'd scoff at that, wave a hand, call it flattery, exaggeration. What about, *You're awful. You might be perfect.* No? Or maybe, *Shit, I didn't expect you. Where did you come from, man?* Open ended questions might go down better – or would it be seen only as rhetorics?

Maybe just, *Could you touch me?* Maybe just that. *Please, please touch me.*

Would he need to vocally categorise, or would physical clarification be sufficient? To cross over the line and touch Hermann on the hip and just *see* what he does? Or maybe Newt was going to just suck it up and fucking *kiss* him, right up against his blackboards, hands under his collar and screw the consequences here - but *then*. Oh, then.

Then, 2024 had turned out to be *the worst*.

Ergo.

Nope.

Sure, it's been the most exciting year in terms of work that there's been since the kaiju started coming through the breach; every one now seems to be adapting, changing, developing more awesome weaponry with new skills, limbs, tails, jaws, even thumb-like digits on one. It's almost exclusively Category IVs coming through now, catching them unawares, blowing his *mind* - but getting past too many Jaeger to be anywhere near okay. And not to blame something Newt truly believes are incredible for his own lack of *action* here, *no*, but after a few close calls with Hermann he'd just. He *had* to take a tangential tactic.

Breach ruptures, kaiju, world changing events - these kind of things get in the way, hey. There are some bigger fucking things going on than his long standing metaphorical hard-on and his stupid *heart* here. And what's he going to do, say something to Hermann and then they'll just...get back to work? This is hardly the opportune *moment*.

So. Newt's working towards an end goal, here. A *when*. They've worked too hard for too long to get distracted. He can't let himself indulge. He's got shit to *do*. He can't really think about it until they close the Breach.

This is a *plan*, by the way. It's *not* procrastination. It's just that the world seems to be determined to end, the kaiju are getting bigger and better and worse at the same time, and Hermann's exhausted, and so is he. Is this the time? Uh, no. Additionally Newt's not exactly a *joy* to be around right now, he knows, he's jittery and nervous and snappy, pissed the fuck off that he's gone and had this happen right *now* - although. Realistically, if it's the time for *admitting* shit and he does seem to be, Newt might have to accept this could have been the case years ago. He might *always* have been like this. Maybe the first time Hermann's great big brain and his great big hands started *doing things*, that was it. Or. The first time he corrected Newt? Or when Hermann first looked him up and down as if he wasn't quite good enough, but he was also *intriguing*... Yeah. Then.

Then?

Great. Realisations all over the place at the moment, wow. So this is a bit too *much* going on. Carpe Diem is one thing, sure, but there isn't going to *be* a day to seize if they don't sort out the Breach. So Newt's possibly never been so motivated. He's got a family, he's got this guy next to him he can't imagine not sharing a room with ever again, and he's attempting to reconcile two things together because he can't picture a world without kaiju in it either, but he's got to hope for that, too. Couldn't they have come before now? *Everyone's* timing is shit. Maybe later, maybe *after* he'd gotten a chance to find out how Hermann would kiss *him*, or how he tastes? Or. Actually, no. That would have been worse.

Better the devil you know, right. Or. Don't.

And is he even— is he even worth it? He knows Hermann, but he doesn't know *everything*. Hermann tolerates him, likes him, has stayed with him even *now*, but not - not like that, and Newt's. Well. For one, he's probably aged a shitload in the last few years. He found some early grey in his stubble when he sort of shaved last time.

Not cool.

There has been a breakthrough in his work, at least. If he can call it that. Something a bit more slow-motion, perhaps; less of a Eureka moment, more of a long, cold shower. He's painstakingly building an idea that came when he went back to the DNA and started trying to find the connections between them. He hasn't voiced it yet, not to Hermann, not to *anyone*, keeping it atypically close to his chest. Another secret. He's normally *so* bad at keeping those but even he can see that it's too crazy, at the moment, to share. It's way too *big*, until he's sure. He doesn't want to lose it, so he's not looking at it directly, yet. Approaching it sideways, instead.

There's method in his madness, but madness in his methods, sure, he can see that. There always has been. It works for him. And there *is* a pattern taking shape across the samples. He's slowing building a picture of the DNA to compare - and finding *echoes*. Only, he's also missing huge sections, and working with others that are damaged and incomplete. It's like trying to recreate a melody with only a handful of notes. The part with the awesome bassline of terror, in the soundtrack to their lives.

Alaska is the first Shatterdome to close, on October 12th. Pentecost turns up on the 13th, along with his daughter - who is now the senior mechanic in their Jaeger Programme, has rad blue tips to her hair, *and* is taller than Newt, fuck his life, he can tell from the feed of their arrival that she's going to be - and half of the senior LOCCENT staff.

He also brings a Jaeger none of them have seen for years.

"My goodness," Hermann says, the morning after it's been brought in, stopping so abruptly outside the bay doors that Newt walks into him and almost spills his coffee. He has to leap backwards to save it, in a fully rockstar quarter-bow that Hermann doesn't even notice because he just starts moving, rushing into the dome bay past a mountain of crates to stare up at it, leaning heavily on his cane, his eyes wide.

"Gipsy *Danger*," he says, under his breath, after Newt's trudged in after him. He's *staring* up at it, in obvious appreciation. His throat is long and distracting. Still, obvious is as obvious does. Newt rolls his eyes, glancing up as well.

"Uh, *yeah*," he says, pointing to the massive name painted on its enormous chest metres above them, like a tattoo.

Hermann looks down *just* so he can scowl at him.

"Of course," he says, pissy. "*You* appreciate *nothing* here. This was one of the first Mark IIIs, Newton." He gives a graceful gesture at it. "Heavily damaged, and here she still stands..." His practised gaze roaming over the exposed plates, the wiring, the huge scaffolding up each side and the techs scuttling all over it. "The rebuilding work is remarkable."

"Yeah yeah," Newt grumbles, turning away to head to work and leave Hermann to gape. "It's *old*. Of course you like it." He slurps his coffee noisily, deliberately, to drown out whatever Hermann snaps after him.

She *is* pretty cool, though, he can begrudgingly see it. Later that day, however, the infamous *Mako Mori* comes to see them, and she pretty much blows that one out of the water. Metaphorically, not — Shit, Newt's got to stop using water analogies.

"Doctors?" her voice calls, surprising them - they don't get a lot of visitors - and they turn as one to see her enter the lab, ducking through the arched doorway politely as if it's tiny, not huge.

She looks all business, uniformed in a jumpsuit, with a thick folder under her arm. The last time Newt saw her in person in Lima she was, what, 13? And, now she's hot. He *suspected*, yeah, there have been occasional pap shots and updates on her in the press since she was a kid, but she's been fairly hidden away up in Anchorage in the PPDC for years - perks of having Pentecost as your dad, he supposes. Still, it surprises him a little, in person. She's hella beautiful, and he suddenly feels *ancient*.

"Miss Mori!" Hermann says, apparently not having any sort of internal struggle as he takes his glasses off, standing up. She stops in surprise.

“You remember me?” She smiles, then, and gives them both a neat bow, which they return. Well, Newt returns it; Hermann does that *and* fucking salutes her, all earnest and sincere, and her eyes go all crinkly and pleased.

She crosses over to them, putting her folder down on a surface, then nods at them both again. “I wished to come and introduce myself, again,” she says, looking at them. “It has been a long time, I did not expect you to know me right away.”

Newt shrugs, his thoughts catching up, finally. “Geniuses,” he says, pointing to his head.

She smiles. “Yes. I remember that.”

“You do?” Hermann asks her, obviously not expecting that either, and her smile changes, her expression somehow younger.

“Yes, Dr. Gottlieb. You gave me a biscuit, once, when my— when Marshall Pentecost had to answer a call.”

Newt snorts delightedly, raising his eyebrows and turning to his lab partner.

“Oh, *Hermann*. Sweets?” He folds his arms, mock-stern. “What scandal. Corrupting the youth of the future.”

Hermann sniffs, ostentatiously. “You know full well that I used to get care packages from my sister. When one *could* buy such things.”

Mori nods, politely. “It was very kind. And delicious,” she adds, and Hermann gives Newt his own smug look as if to say, *You see?*

“Whatever. What about me?” Newt asks, ignoring the Face, and curious now to know what *he* did to leave an impression on the young padawan. “You remember *me*, of course.”

“Oh, yes. You...have many more tattoos,” Mako says, carefully, nodding towards his arms.

Hermann snorts, derisively. Newt just blinks, grins, glancing down at himself. Yeah, well, no surprise there. He chuckles, twisting his wrists and inner arms towards her, and back over again, as her eyes skirt over the kaiju there. “Yep. Pretty extensive now. You could call me a collector.”

“Yes.” Mako pauses. Her gaze is measured, but no less piercing for it. “I collect swords,” she says, and almost grins.

Newt pauses a second, his mouth open, then laughs. “Sweet.”

She grins, then, very small and lovely.

“Would you like a tea, Miss Mori?” Hermann asks, interrupting their moment. Newt grimaces. Trying to score *points*. Mako shakes her head, though.

“No, thank you. I must return to the Bay. However, Marshall Pentecost would like an update on your current areas of focus, and will come as soon as he is able to for a full review in person. He asked me to let you know in advance.”

Newt and Hermann glance at each other.

“Of course,” Hermann says, carefully.

“Can do,” Newt agrees, then folds his arms to show the unspoken suspicion between them. “He could have just sent a message, though?”

“Yes,” Mako admits. “He was going to, but I...stopped him.” She almost looks embarrassed. “I was hoping for a reason to come. It has been a long time.”

“Ugh, don’t fucking remind me,” Newt complains, and Hermann makes an embarrassed noise even as she raises both eyebrows slightly.

“*Newton*, please,” he hisses.

“What?”

Hermann throws Mako an apologetic look and then glares at him. “Why *I* am still shocked at your lack of propriety I will never know, but you could please *attempt* to control yourself around Miss Mori?”

Newt just laughs. “Dude, she’s an adult now,” he gestures at her.

“Unlike *you*.”

“Pretty sure you were the Hermann Gottlieb telling me my Ocarina of Time t-shirt was a disgrace to my 34th birthday this year.”

Hermann crosses his own arms. “It absolutely was. If you must insist on continuing the charade of adulthood, you could at least dress like one.”

Mako, watching them with a mixture of shock and bemusement – the usual look they get from others – lets slip a soft chuckle of her own, distracting them before Newt can take a breath deep enough to explain *all* the ways Hermann is wrong.

Her eyes widen when they both look at her.

“...My apologies. Please, continue the argument,” she says, and Newt laughs again.

Hermann still looks uncomfortable about it all, so predictably he does what he normally does – changes the subject.

“Miss Mori,” he begins, turning smoothly to her. “I saw Gipsy Danger and would like to express my admiration. She looks wonderful. Such exemplary work. Is it a titanium hull?”

Mako bows her head again in thanks. “Yes. Among other things. She was in need of some updating. But I cannot take all of the credit, Dr. Gottlieb, I did not oversee the project alone.” She picks up her folder, preparing to leave, hugging it to her chest. “Have you met Mr Choi, in LOCCENT? He came with us from Anchorage.”

“No. I should?”

She smiles, now. “You should.”

Well, *now* Newt’s intrigued. Hermann just hums, and nods.

“Noted. Thank you.”

“Of course.” Mako bows again, then leaves. She gives them a little wave just as she ducks out of the doorway, and Newt can’t not return it.

Then he immediately turns to Hermann, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“No. You are *not* going to LOCCENT right now. I can’t take you fanboying over *everyone* we meet here, man.”

Hermann scowls at him. “Don’t be so ridiculous, Newton, I have far too much to do to go gallivanting off to LOCCENT.”

Lies. Blatant *lies*. Hermann hates nosiness except when it is *his own*, and then he’ll happily bustle his way in anywhere they like.

So they end up there the next day.

‘Mr Choi’ turns out to be a dude named Tendo, with slicked back dark hair, awesome ink on the side of his neck, and a fucking *bow-tie*. Newt wants to hate him, especially since Hermann suggests they head off to LOCCENT as soon as they’ve had their meeting with Pentecost - in which he basically just says ‘Keep doing what you’re doing, but do it more quickly’, no problems there – but cool, however, recognises cool when it sees it, and Tendo does look interesting.

Or, Newt quickly amends, cool *should* recognisecool. It’s a club, right, surely? Of which he has always been a card carrying member. Tendo should get this. *Tendo*, though, hearing a tech at the door point them in his direction, spins in his chair, sliding his headset off around his neck, and his almost-black eyes skim right over Newt and instead jump to *Hermann*, looking him up and down, once.

“*Great* shoes,” he says, pointing, and Newt stops, just as Hermann does, too. They both look down at Hermann’s feet, the well-polished, old brogues he’s had for a million years, then back up.

“*Seriously?*” Newt asks, under his breath, as Hermann looks dubious.

“Thank you,” he replies, shortly, and Tendo grins and gets up, hand extended to shake theirs.

“Doctors Geiszler and Gottlieb, right?” he asks, shaking Hermann’s hand, then taps his headset with a chuckle. “I’m the eyes and ears, brothers. I hear all.”

“We’re kind of a big deal,” Newt says, grasping his hand briefly. Tendo’s gaze flicks down to the edges of Newt’s tats, curling out under his leather jacket cuffs - yeah, he put it on to come up there, you’ve got to make an *impression* - but lifts back up more quickly and easily than most people’s do. Apart from the one on his throat, there’s more of his own on his hand, sort of; rosary beads wrapped tight around his left wrist and hanging down over his hand in such a familiar way that Newt would happily wager they’re almost always there. When he sits down again, he laces his fingers in his lap and his thumb rubs over the beads almost subconsciously. Yup.

“Good to meet you guys,” he says, and it sounds like he means it. “I understand you’re it now, right? K-Science buck stops here, and all that?”

Newt snorts, sitting down on the control panel next to him as Hermann sits in the chair he has just rolled over to himself. “Yup. We’re the hardcore crew.”

Something beeps. He’s pressed a button with his ass. He gets up again to fix it, and he *hears* Hermann make a face behind him.

“Unfortunately,” he says, on cue. Newt flips two fingers at him without even turning, and sits down more carefully again.

“So *Anchorage!*” He’s burning to know, it’s the one base he’s never been near. “How was that, man? How long were you up there?”

Tendo looks weary, suddenly, for just a second, age showing around his mouth, but it passes from his features before Newt can really catch or categorise it. “5 years. And you know what, I’m a San Fran native, and we did have summers up there, but I *swear* I’ve forgotten what sun is?”

“Pff. Try *Vladivostok*,” Newt says.

Tendo considers this. “Too late,” he says, ruefully.

It’s a good fucking point. Newt has to agree. And then, alas, Hermann clears his throat, brings up Gipsy Danger, asks Tendo about the current Jaeger tech in use there - and that’s it, they’re off. Full steam a-fucking-*head*. Tendo leans forward in his chair to describe, Hermann leans forward in his to listen, and Newt rolls his eyes.

He makes it through about 10 minutes before giving up and leaving. It’s not that he doesn’t understand – of course he fucking does, his degrees in mechanical bio-engineering would attest to that, thanks - he just. Doesn’t *care*.

“A very nice man,” Hermann says when he comes back after lunch, all humming and *pleased*, calmer than he’s seemed in weeks. If he needed to talk tech that badly, he could have fucking done it with *Newt*. He scowls, pointing this out, and then Hermann complains that he would but Newt always makes everything about *kaiju*. And. What? Of course he does, that’s the *point*.

He calls Hermann a nerd, and gets ignored for the rest of the day.

I love you? he thinks again, at the back of Hermann’s head, mentally shaking his own.

Weeks slip by, days tumbling, and sleep is a thing Newt’s forgotten and forsaken. Kaiju come, kaiju go - as do Pilots, coastal housing, and too many fucking lives. The Wall keeps extending, getting higher, just finished up in Sydney now. Remaining Jaeger will start coming their way from the rest of the locations that are closing, as do any crew that are point blank refusing to lose their jobs.

By the beginning of November, Newt goes over the numbers in his head as he waits for a toxin sample to froth. Vladivostok, LA, Lima. Khamisi emails Newton 6 recipes in one go whilst he can, before his access and address disappears from the network, now at home in Moscow. Polina sends a photograph of herself with all of the things she manage to steal before the ‘dome was closed.

Newt laughs out loud, then hides the screen from Hermann when he inquires about it.

It reminds him of the photo from Lima, suddenly, and he remembers that it’s somewhere in a drawer in his room - along with Hermann’s book that he’s Not Thinking about. They haven’t got a place to pin it up, here, and actually Newt thinks it might be a *little* too narcissistic, even for him, since it’s only the two of them in it now to see it. In reality *and* in the picture. Just them, off-centre. They’re down to a dividing line and he is less bothered about admitting his preference to himself, so he knows that if he got it out he’d probably fold the part with himself over until all you could see is the arm of his leather jacket, and Hermann. Younger, and smiling, in the sun.

He’s not going there. He’s leaving it in the drawer, ignoring all the things they had back then that they don’t, now. Time. Ignorance, antagonism. Optimism. Hermann’s *smile lines*.

Newt’s knee twitches just *thinking* about it.

Tokyo's entire J-Tech department arrive, and find a way to assimilate themselves into roles that didn't really exist. Hong Kong will also be gaining Buff and Buffer Hansen - and their dog - once Sydney goes in December, whilst the Kaidanovskys are already on their way. Apparently they *could* have been here a few days before, but they wanted to travel with their Jaeger, not ahead of it, like their crew have.

Newt can't *wait* for it. Jesus, it's gonna be interesting with all these Pilots here, particularly when they decide whoever's gonna be in Hermann's favourite.

The Wei Tangs are strutting around like they can't decide if they're excited, or territorial.

He gets all the kaiju samples that are left, the accumulation of the other labs and some new parts from recent kills, but it's not all good. Most are paltry, shitty bits that don't tell him enough; mangled cells and claw edges, a tooth here, a dead parasite there. 'Slapdash' is the word Hermann uses, the treatment of them even worse than it has been the last few years.

Newt would say something a lot fucking stronger, with a lot more syllables.

Mid November, he's re-checking personnel files in a pre-emptive strike of his own - the Hansens were on another of their trips to Hong Kong before Sydney closes, and Newt may or may not have called the younger one a wooden toy soldier that morning and so may or may *not* be expecting at least a note to appear on his file, which he will delete - when something makes him double-take.

Triple-take.

He clamps down on the strangled noise that wants to escape his mouth, and tugs on his tie, once, in a distracted rush of amusement and as an attempt to keep himself under control. He needs to grab *something*.

"Uh, Hermann?" he calls, all faux-lightly, staring at his screen.

Hermann mutters distractedly, reaching for a mug of tea with one hand as he moves things around on his holo-screen with the other. He's trying *so* hard to be ambidextrous like Newt, and he is never, ever going to be as good at it, whatever he tries.

"You *know* that I am busy, Newton," Hermann calls, irritated.

"Yup, yup. Sure. You're also married, apparently."

Hermann chokes on his tea, dribbling some down onto his vest. He spins to stare at Newt, wiping his chin automatically, his vest shiny.

"I *beg* your pardon?"

Newt just points, agitated with the need to laugh. "Your personnel file. Says you're married and expecting a kid sometime next year."

Hermann blinks, unfolds himself from his chair, limps over, and takes in what Newt's screen says. Newt bites his bottom lip, tries not to twist fingers in the lick of hair sticking up at the back of Hermann's head, and tries not to fucking howl with laughter. Is he mocking? No. Does he want to be? Yes. *Could* he be? Yes. A lot. This is impressive.

"...For goodness' *sake*," Hermann says, finally, shaking his head at the data in front of him. "Eight years. One would think they might be able to get their facts correct after *eight years*."

“I guess you could blame Bastien? For that piece he wrote?” Newt suggests, still biting back his mockery.

Gottlieb the younger’s last article had been a pretty *strong* piece about the closing of the Shatterdomes, the continuing fight of the PPDC, a pretty thinly hidden diatribe about the Wall, and reference to his brother’s continuing efforts within the system, to work on the future for his soon to be growing family. Hermann glances over his shoulder to make a face at Newt, at that, so he shrugs. “I dunno, maybe in the personnel shakeup, everything’s getting updated all ‘slapdash’ too?” He uses airquotes. He *has* to.

Hermann sighs, long and low. “Wonderful.” He straightens up, rubbing his face. “I suppose that Dietrich *is* a doctor, too, though of a fairly *different* kind, of course, any imbecile would be able to tell that with some cursory research.” His scowl is so rumpled, his grumbling so bitchy and so *cute* that Newt can’t hold it in anymore.

He sniggers, then he *laughs*, his voice going croaky.

“This is not *funny*, Newton,” Hermann insists, but Newt slaps him on the shoulder, cackling, then collapses heavily into his chair, rubbing his stomach where it hurts from laughing.

“Oh my *god*, yes it is.”

Hermann just looks at him, with his wide mouth curving a little, a hint of amusement at last, and Newt lets him have it, lets him see Newt laugh because he needs to *lighten up*, this is hilarious. “Oh, man,” he moans, taking his glasses off to wipe an eye. “I needed that.”

“Yes you did,” Hermann agrees, softly, quickly, watching him, and Newt looks at him in surprise - but he’s already leaning in all suddenly towards the screen, to amend the file, his face deliberately set and his shoulders up, his fingers tense over the keys. He throws a small, entertained look Newt’s way after he saves and closes the amended file, though. And, shit.

I love you, I love you, Newt thinks, stupidly, watching him go back to his work.

A couple of days later, a selection of samples of what *should* have been an enormous throat and mangled windpipe comes Newt’s way from a kaiju that attacked near Vancouver a few hours before. It’s split into boxes, though. With *fingerprint* impressions in the flesh.

The piece in the first box oozes out onto his table in a useless fucking mess, and he looks at it in dismay at for a second, cataloguing the poor handling, the overly sharp scent of preservatives. They’ve doused it too much, cut it up, and shoved it in boxes. Newt can’t work with *this*.

That. Is fucking. *It*.

He swears, throws the box against the wall with a metallic clang, shoves his glasses up as his nose with his forearm, and scoops the sample up in both gloved hands - only white ones left, now, bummer - then storms his way out of the lab and straight toward the Jaeger bay, the mess still grasped in hand, and his teeth set.

Hermann calls after him, but he ignores it. A number of people sidestep him fast in the corridors when they see the purplish-black flesh in his grasp, and someone shouts at him there too, but he ignores them as well. His rolled-up sleeves show the inked kaiju on his forearms as it should be in *life*, in full 3D *colour*, not the shitty, drained crap in his hands when he looks down.

Just as he enters the Bay, he almost stops – the Kaidanovskys are there, overseeing Cherno Alpha as it’s assigned an area and secured. He keeps going, because he has places to *be*. Sasha notices

him however, and elbows Aleksis, hard, so that he swivels his massive head to watch Newt stamping past.

“Doctor Newton,” she calls after him, her eyebrow arching.

“Sup guys,” he grits out, riding the tide of anger and marching on.

“You have blue on you,” Aleksis points out, and he waves a hand in irritation vaguely. Pentecost is in his sights, his back to the door, Hansen the Elder next to him. The two of them are leaning over a report together as staff rush around them, and most of the picture presented to Newt is big fuck-off shoulders and not a lot else; an incongruous stillness in the midst of activity. Solid and strong, he *supposes*, but he could also say fucking *stuck*, mired in military modes and not seeing what’s around them.

He resists the urge to yank a sleeve or kick the back of a knee, and instead takes a leaf from Hermann’s book, clearing his throat pointedly and repeatedly and *loudly*, his uneven voice lending it a cracked edge that gets their attention much faster. Hermann would never be so rude around military, of course, but whatever.

Pentecost turns first, looking back over his shoulder, his eyebrows drawing down when he sees Newt and the mess of flesh in his hands.

“See *this*?” he asks, a little pointlessly, lifting it higher and waving it.

“Yes, I *do*,” Pentecost replies, turning fully as his colleague does as well. “The question is as to why, Dr. Geiszler, I am seeing it in my Jaeger bay, and not in the lab.”

“Why? *Why*? Well you see there’s no *point* it being in the lab. Look at it! I can’t do anything with this, but apparently no-one can be *bothered* to treat samples with any *respect* and are continuing to manhandle them so I don’t get anything fucking useful, so why bother! It’s as much use here as there.” Newt clenches his fingers in it, flesh giving way with what should be a solid, rubbery pressure and instead is a brittle sort of sinking inward, with a sound like popping plastic bubbles, only way less *fun*.

Pentecost glances down at it, so he jiggles it again to reiterate.

“You have. To stop. Sending *them*.” He leaves the reference to whoever goes and cuts up most of the kaiju kills as anonymous; he doesn’t actually know who goes to most of the drops he isn’t cleared to. “You’ve gotta send *me*. No matter how far they are. When we had money I used to get to go - I know now we have none but this is a *waste* of it. Apparently I’m the only person with any skill or finesse left here, and I need better samples to finish my work, because I have an *idea*, and I actually *know what I’m doing*.”

Pentecost eyes him, holding himself utterly composed for a second, before looking to Hansen next to him. Herc, Newt thinks his name is - if that is in fact his *real name* and not something he’s just trying to live up to - just sighs, and then shrugs at the Marshall.

“You’ve got an idea?” Hansen asks Newt, and Pentecost’s eyes flick back to him then, cool, when he answers.

“*Yeah*, I do, but I can’t do anything about it unless I go and get what I need. You gotta send *me*.”

After a moment, during which he feels the weight of both men’s observation, Pentecost *finally* nods.

“Alright, Dr. Geiszler. Next kaiju kill, you can go.” He makes a note on the pad in his hands, and continues without looking back at him. “Now if you don’t *mind* please getting that out from under our noses?”

Newt, pleased, drops his hand, a drip splashing on the floor. “Oh, no, you can chill, it’s been decontaminated to the point of uselessness - this is basically *cardboard*. There’s no need to worry.”

“Dr. *Geiszler*,” Pentecost repeats, voice hardening.

“Alright! Alright, *okay*,” he replies, and turns to leave, then turns back. “*Thank* you,” he adds, with a tight nod, as he should, though probably in too poor an impersonation of Hermann to work for him. And yeah, Herc Hansen clenches his jaw, seeing it, so Newt gets out of there quickly.

The Kaidanovskys are still watching as he approaches again.

“Newton! It is...nice to see you,” Sasha says.

“Hey guys,” he calls, at a slower pace now, peeling off one glove to wrap it around the sample so that it drips less on the way back. “Nice to see you’re still alive, too.”

Aleksis gives a rumble of black humour. “*Pasib*,” he intones, rings flashing as he tucks his hands into his belt.

“And how are *you*, child?” Sasha asks Newt, the wicked bitch, still eyeing the gloop he’s wrapping up neatly as he passes. He scowls at ‘child’, but feels a thrill that she *remembered*, grinning at her briefly over his shoulder. “You have solved your problem?” she calls as he fiddles with the fingers of the glove.

“Nope!” he replies cheerily, on a satisfied adrenaline comedown and a moment of madness, yeah. “Love got involved - totally fucked - good to see you!” He waves, from the doorway.

The marrieds watch him leave, their heads tilted.

He doesn’t see them again for a while – well, it’s not like they were *super* close, and he had remembered to give back all the poetry books he borrowed before he left, unlike a certain biochemist he could mention, so there’d be no reason for Aleksis to come booming into the lab to get them. It’s a few days until they surface again, after *Tendo* comes wandering into the lab, late on a Friday night, his thumbs hooked into red suspenders, over his shirt.

“Poker!” he calls, and when they look up, he’s grinning.

“Polo?” Newt says, and Tendo chuckles.

“Poker. *Gambling*. It’s the third Friday of the month, and that, in my world, is Poker time. We missed it last month because of the move, but hey. We did it every month in Anchorage,” he clarifies, at Hermann’s pointed stare, “so we can do it here.”

Newt leaps at the idea. In the very real sense; he gets up so quickly that he sends his wheeled stool spinning across the floor and into the dissection table with a clang. He’s been trying to get Hermann to play card games with him for fucking *years*. They’re going to wipe the floor with *everyone*. ...If there are teams.

“Are there teams?” he asks Tendo, yanking his tie off over his head and hooking it up next to his labcoat.

Tendo just looks at him. “It’s everyone for themselves, man. This is the end of the world.”

“Ah, shit. Nevermind. Hermann!” He looks over at his lab partner who, after vague protests, has deigned to shut down his visualizer, moving slowly. “No cheating!”

Hermann raises himself to his full long-legged height. “*I* will not *need* to,” he replies, imperiously. There is a shadow of a wolfish grin on his face that surprises Newt, and, of course, turns him on so suddenly and strongly that his stomach jerks, he just wants to *eat*—

Tendo interrupts by laughing, slapping Hermann on the shoulder. “Fighting spirit, brother, I like it. You’re going to need it.”

He takes them to his own assigned quarters where a table has been dragged in, along with a number of chairs stolen from LOCCENT.

His space is surprisingly neat, one wall by the desk covered in printed pictures of he and a woman with long, blonde hair and a lip ring, a most definitely non-regulation full length mirror in the corner, a complicated system of wiring, machinery parts – that looks like half an old automobile engine – set up by his bed with various tools strewn around on a red piece of cloth on the floor, and a pile of cushions next to it.

More excitingly, Mako is already there, rifling through a deck of cards with a sure hand.

Her tips look freshly blue today. Newt had told her she needed to redo them a couple of days before, as they passed in the Mess, and Hermann had slapped him in the back of the head.

“Always here first,” Tendo grins, gesturing to her seated on the end, and she smiles at him.

“As is our tradition,” she concedes, and nods at them.

Newt grins, already rolling up his sleeves. “Your dad know you’re here?”

She frowns at him, immediately, her whole face gaining an edge and her shoulders tightening. “I am an adult, Doctor Geiszler, as you pointed out.”

He holds both hands up, placating. He knows she’s been through the Pilot training, she could probably whip him across the table, without even breaking a sweat. “Woah, true, true. No offense meant.”

“But somehow always *given*,” Hermann sighs, hooking his cane on the table and sinking into a chair with a little breathy sound, shooting a look at him.

Hermann’s knee is bad at the moment. No time for exercise. Newt feels a little sick about it actually, and resolves to find a way of bullying him into stopping work for long enough to go to the gym, without actually bullying him. Or making it so obvious that’s he’s a totally lovesick idiot. He can’t think of a response other than scowling, and pulling up his jeans where they’ve slipped down before he sits as well.

“Marshall Pentecost joins us pretty often,” Tendo says, grinning. “He’s the one who taught Mako.”

Mako smiles at Tendo and her face changes again, like the fucking sun coming out. She is *cute*. Newt feels scarily fond already. She reminds him of Hanna. Hanna is a *mom* now, though.

He is too old for this.

“*Tendo*,” she says. “You taught me, remember?”

“Yeah, but he perfected your skills once he found out.”

“True.” She grins. “You have not beaten me for four months now.”

“A fact I am very aware of,” he grumbles.

The game turns out to be very popular, with a handful of techs who came across from Anchorage squeezing into the space with them, along with the couple he witnessed in the elevator – Aima, he learns her name is, the girl who came from Sydney, and she’s decided to stay, to the obvious pleasure and relief of her girlfriend Liu, and though neither of them saw him or even know that he was *there* when they were arguing, he gives them both a big, beaming smile when they’re introduced, and Hermann narrows his eyes suspiciously at Newt.

The Wei Tang triplets come later, strolling in at the same time as the Kaidanovskys. Aleksis ducks under the lintel of the door and Newt sees Hu look up at him, considering.

“You play basketball?” he asks.

Aleksis frowns. “No. It is too easy.”

Newt ends up wedged between Jin Wei Tang, and Sasha. Jin throws him a side-eye, but hands him a glass for the bottle of spirits that inevitably comes out, and nods when Newt waggles his at him in an approximation of cheers. When he looks away, Newt turns to Sasha, right into what would have been the cloud of smoke that he *knows* she wants to blow at him, but Tendo had vetoed all smoking “around his sheets and that solenoid”, so instead she’s just staring at him, startlingly close up.

“*Zzso*,” she says, intent. “This is your problem?” She jerks her head slightly across to where Tendo and Hermann are chatting, easily, Mako listening along with her chin in one hand. Sasha’s voice is pitched low under the noise of too many stressed, overworked people settling in, getting to know one another, handing out cards and taking first drinks, everything a strange sort of balm for frayed nerves. Society, shared insanity. All good.

“Hmm?” he asks at first, thinking she means Tendo - then gets it. “Oh. Yup.” He jiggles one knee under her gaze, spinning his now empty glass between his palms like he’s trying to start a fire.

“Yeah. Big problem.”

“Hmn.” She gives Hermann another considering look, from his ruffled hair to his sweater vest, from his stretched-out bad leg to his big fingers, elegantly sketching something he is explaining in the air as he talks. Newt watches her, surprisingly invested in her opinion, but she has good poker face and they’re not even playing yet; he has no *idea* what she’s thinking, but finds that he really, really wants to. Finally, she nods. “...I can see this.”

He laughs, once, a scratchy bark of a sound. “Thanks?”

She turns to face him again. “You should make some move. Act. What do you wait for?”

“Er, the world not to end?” he suggests. He should really stop talking about this, but he *needs* to, and she’s there, and she’s sort of reading everything in his face *anyway*. There are no stars overhead but his breath still feels jittery and cold in his chest, like years before.

“Ha.” She lifts her cards again, her voice dour. “We must see what we can do.”

“Team Fuck It!” he explains, bumping a shoulder against her.

They don’t bet on money. No -one has enough to spare, and it’s not nearly so appealing as the *real* treasure: ration allowances, and some greedily hoarded treats. A half bar of dark chocolate appears from where it was secreted away in Aleksis’ coat halfway through the third game, and Newt sees Hermann’s eyes get very big. He sits up straighter, and then frowns imperceptibly at his cards. Newt wants to win it for him, suddenly, furiously. Maybe Hermann would do that *smile*, at him, if he did.

Newt has *issues*.

A few games later, he’s lost the popping candy Hanna sent him 6 months before, Mako’s eyeing the clear bottle of what Aleksis assures her repeatedly is vodka, and Hermann has won *himself* the chocolate, and looks like what Gunter would call ‘the cat that has got the cream’. All the seats have been switched up, and people are really beginning to chill out, now. Newt suspects that this whole thing is less about poker and more about time together. He likes it.

That he got *invited*, is even better.

Aima’s sitting on her girlfriend’s lap, talking with two of the techs – from Lima and LA, apparently - and the Weis are sniping furiously at each other in Shanghainese, probably about how terrible they all are at cards, which is just making Newt’s *night*. Life, maybe. He’s got his boots up on a now empty chair, feeling pleasantly buzzed, as are most of them; Hermann’s cheeks are a little flushed, his jacket discarded, but Newt doesn’t plan or need to have any more to drink. This is good. This is gold.

Tendo prods him in the shoulder unexpectedly, and he jerks. He moves his feet so that Tendo can sit down, and he does, grinning at him.

“Hey, Geiszler. You can last another round?”

“Sure, my man.” He sits up, runs his fingers through his hair. “Not got much left to lose now.”

Tendo grins. “I bet you can find *something*. Shuffle these.” He hands Newt a well-thumbed deck.

Newt starts mixing them up, as well as he can. “So you played every month in Anchorage?” he asks, splitting the deck clumsily, smoothing out one half by bumping the edge of it against his jaw, to line them up, and then jamming the two parts back together.

“Yeah, brother,” Tendo says, amused. “Every month. With tears dripping down our faces, sometimes, sure, but we did it.”

He looks up. “...I guess tradition is important.”

“Keeps you sane.” Tendo agrees.

Later, still, he ends up between Mako and Hermann. He’s not too proud to quietly beg Mako for help, because no, he really does *not* have anything *like* poker face, whereas Hermann’s won the last two rounds with a sort of steely determination, his glasses on the end of his nose, that Newt is just finding *super* attractive, and he can’t even be sure if Hermann is counting cards or *not*. He lost count himself at least an hour before. He tries to get Hermann to admit it, muttering in his ear, but Hermann just glares at him and remains tightly, beautifully lipped on the subject, fuck his *face*, and then ups his bet.

Newt turns to Mako instead, because she is nice, and also out of this round, and hasn’t been

drinking.

“You know I have been stuck with him for 8 *years*?” he complains, knowing that she does, and she giggles at him as Hermann briefly tutts their way, disapprovingly.

“You must be compatible in some way,” she says, more quietly, when Hermann has gone back to his cards, and her eyes dart towards the Pilots in the room in a slightly *hungry* way. Two of the Weis have left, but Hu remains, chatting up a tech who looks faintly star-struck, to be honest, whilst Sasha is sitting in her husband’s lap, arms around his neck, muttering something in his ear as they both look down at his cards.

Newt snorts. “You have Pilots on the brain, kid,” he teases.

She laughs again, gently, blushing a little, caught out.

“Well, perhaps.” She smiles, small. “I want to be one. I *will* be one.”

Newt nods at her. He’s sure she will. Tiny, awesome, damaged girl. She deserves it, fuck. He contemplates the whole concept of Drift Compatibility for a moment, looking at her face, and not for the first time. He’s thought about it a lot over the years, of *course* he has. The idea that you and everyone else can know a person is *perfect*, will fit with you, slide into all the places you don’t know you have, like a puzzle? Fill your gaps. Uh. Sort of.

But what *is* perfect, for a person? Perfect. For him?

“Perfectly compatible is a 100% *dangerously* fucked-up ideal,” he says, finishing his thoughts out loud.

Mako looks confused. “Yes?” she says, politely.

Newt snorts, spinning the ring around his little finger. “Nevermind. Look. No worries, hey? You’re gonna have no problem finding someone compatible with *you*. I’d guess you’re gonna be badass enough to make up for any of your co-pilots potential weaknesses.”

She tilts her head at him. “If we are compatible, there should be no weaknesses, I think.”

He grins. “*Nobody’s* perfect.”

“You and Dr. Gottlieb are not...perfect, but you obviously work well together,” she says, carefully, and he raises his eyebrows.

“Uh, *no*. We’re not... We’re. Like.” He tries to find a new analogy, casting his eyes around, as fuck knows he’s used enough in his own mind over the years, not just screamed out loud during an argument. Next to him, Hermann turns his cards down on the table with a sigh and declares himself out, then picks up his glass, and Newt thinks of one. “Yes! We’re that. Sort of. We’re a *wine glass*!”

Mako has that politely confused expression again. Newt waves a hand, then grabs Hermann’s arm to make him turn to them, to explain.

“Dude, you’ll want to listen to this.”

“*Will* I?” he asks, but shuffles in his chair to face them both.

“So *he’s*—” Newt points, and Hermann looks at the tip of his finger a few inches from his nose

with some consternation, “—the glass; empty, brittle, all long stem legs and a great big cranium generally lacking all those integral factors like *alcohol* that make him more appealing – and I’m the wet finger running around the rim, all shiny and purposeful and driven, I am a precise and slick physical form, and most of the time he just makes this high pitched tonal whining noise that I *ignore*, until eventually he is going to crack under the pressure, and I am going to save the world.”

He’s pleased with this one.

Mako’s eyes are wide.

Hermann looks pretty *unimpressed*.

“Truly, Newton, you have outdone yourself there,” he says.

Newt grins at him, and he sighs.

“Excuse me,” he says, putting a hand lightly on Newt’s knee so that he can lean past him to apologise to *Mako*, whilst Newt gets nothing but a funny look for his fucking fantastic description of them, and starts getting up. He wobbles though, and Newt catches him under the elbow, because his leg cracked audibly, sickeningly, as he stood up, and he didn’t manage to hide the wince.

Newt looks up at him whilst he gets his balance, silently, then leans to get his cane and hands it over to him.

“Thank you,” Hermann says, quietly, then gets out from the table and heads for the bathroom. Newt watches him go, then turns back to see Mako watching *him*.

“This glass. Is it half empty, or half full?” she asks, after a second, and he laughs, throwing his arms wide.

“No fucking idea.”

She laughs as well, and makes to pat him on the arm, then somehow seems to think better of it halfway, to change her mind, and her half-aborted movement means that her fingertips hardly brush Yamarashi on his forearm, as if she doesn’t *want* to touch it. He notices. She notices that he notices. They both look at his arm, then at each other. Mako frowns a little, focussing, and seems to make some decision to herself. She puts her hand on his whole arm, her fingers lightly touching the inked teeth of the kaiju, the swirls of red, and her eyes are distant as she does it. Newt shivers, expecting her to do it, then unable to wait any longer when she doesn’t.

“Do they not frighten you, Dr. Geiszler?” she murmurs.

“Newt,” he insists, automatically. “And yeah, of course they’re terrifying, are you kidding me? Shit. But. I like that. They’re *amazing*.”

She hums something indistinct, and looks back up to him. “I will continue to prefer the Jaeger, I think.”

He smiles. “Cool with me.”

The rest of December turns out to be a shitstorm. 3 kaiju come in 2 weeks, the last domes close, and he’s busy working himself into what Hermann calls a *tissy*, but he can’t really talk, he’s been muttering to himself for days about predictions and sketching calendars and timelines everywhere, even in the Mess Hall, on his *napkin*. Newt is close to something, anyway, working on his own things. Because The DNA. He thinks the *DNA matches*, and not just in hereditary ways, in

unnatural, mirrored symmetry. He thinks the kaiju are *clones*. And even though Hermann tells him this is *ridiculous*, he's working on it. It could be. It *is*.

He gets sent to a kaiju corpse near Panama that was killed on land, and disseminates what's left of it himself, overseeing the team's work with his headtorch on, shouting instructions from halfway up a ladder, like Hermann often does, throughout a very black night with helicopters circling overhead, the lights wheeling away and coming back. He then forgoes sleep for the rest of that week and the next to the point that Hermann hides all of his ration cards and then *follows* him back to his room when he says he is going to change, to make sure he goes there, and doesn't simply circle back to the lab.

"Following me home like a lost kitten," Newt complains, one arm hooked through the wheel lock on his door, aiming for rogueish but probably alighting more around *dazed*.

"It was hardly *far*," Hermann replies, eyeing him. Whatever. This is huge. *Huge*. Newt needs to keep working. He needs sleep though. But he can't. He possibly needs to take something again. He needs Hermann to run a big hand up the back of his neck and into his hair, but he's not going to get that.

Hermann purses his lips, in thought, then pokes Newt in the solar plexus with his cane until he backs up into his room.

"Sit," he orders, and Newt does, mutely, unsure. Maybe just for a *second*. Hermann doesn't get like this often. It's *fun*.

Hermann brings him a glass of water, and touches his shoulder. Then Newt realises that his eyes have closed, and he's fallen asleep, and jerks upright.

"Newton." Hermann's voice is so *quiet*, and the lights have been turned down to a quarter brightness. When did that happen? He goes for words and ends up on just vowel sounds in response, taking his glasses off to mash at his eyes, and stops when Hermann gets the bottle of pills out of his jacket pocket, putting it down gently and cautiously on the chair next to bed in a gap that's not covered in books and old t-shirts.

Newt puts his glasses back on, and stares. He's not supposed to know about those. But it's no surprise that he *does*. Did.

Whilst he's transfixed, looking at them, pulse pounding, Hermann kneels down awkwardly next to the bed, one hand on the chair to support himself, and Newt's eyes widen, staring at him.

"Woah, wait—" he slurs, no no *no* - but Hermann just starts unlacing his boots for him.

Newt watches him do it, his throat shutting down in surprise and a deep, heady tug of *want*, the pull of sleep and shame warring with it. Hermann's fingers yank deftly at one set of laces, then the other, and then he stops abruptly, standing up again, his movements quick and closed off. He avoids Newt's eye for a moment, then catches it, to glare once again - and that's familiar, though it doesn't have quite the edge it normally does. Newt's heart is rushing like it wants to get out of his chest, like his blood is pumped full of all of the words that are running around his head and won't shut up to let him sleep. He looks up at Hermann, his mouth parted, unsure.

"Newton," Hermann repeats, softer, and then puts his hands in his pockets. "Please. Go to sleep."

Newt blinks slowly, and nods. After Hermann leaves, pulling the door almost shut, he pulls his feet

out of his boots, curls on his side, and, miraculously, does.

The last day of the year, finally, finds him considering something else's brain.

A section of *kaiju* frontal lobe.

It was killed fairly close by, and when he arrives at the site it's already been removed, so he dances about shouting instructions as they get the fragment into a transport tank, marvelling that it's still *alive*. It's damaged, yeah, but still indestructibly *moving*, twitching, flexing, its tendrils reaching out for nothing as he watches it in the helicopter, as they fly back to Hong Kong. He's only had fragments before. An entire *piece*? Fuck.

Once it's back in the lab, he presses his nose to the glass, and Hermann makes a disgusted noise behind him.

"*Fuck*. Happy New Year, Hermann," he says.

"Oh yes, just *wonderful*."

But Newt doesn't listen. He can use this. He can definitely *use* this. They've only got funding for another few months, and Hermann thinks the kaiju are just going to keep coming, in shorter bursts, increasing frequency and numbers until there's two, then three... Newt doesn't know if he's right, but.

He's got an idea.

Chapter End Notes

"Life...finds a way" - the indomitable Dr. Ian Malcolm, *Jurassic Park*, Newt's third favourite childhood movie.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Okay guys, thank you SO MUCH for sticking with me, we are finally there in film events! This means that there are time jumps and most of the moments we see *in* the film are implied, not actually covered, so there some 'gaps'. But you know what happened in them. So please bear in mind going in that the timeframe and formatting are quite different to previous chapters!

Also some warnings for mild blood and gore - nothing worse than what we saw on film, but it never hurts to warn.

Translation

Verfickte Kackscheiße - Fucking fucking shit, basically. Really bad shit. :D

[January 2025]

Why any of this is still surprising to Newt, he doesn't know, watching Hermann cross to his corner of the lab and ignore him, whilst he stands there with his arms still spread wide. The ring of Pentecost and Hansen's boots against the metal floor as they strode away still echoes, but Hermann's derision is more painful.

He watches for a second, then sucks in a deep breath. *Okay* then.

Fuck It.

Hermann can think Newt's stupid all he wants to, but they're *all* being close-minded about his plan. No-one ever really *sees* what he means. The idea had just made everyone nervous - not that Newt isn't used to people being nervous about his plans - even though it's *completely* and *resolutely* an amazing idea. They're too— too *boring* to take the risk, even though *Hermann's* plan is just squiggles on a board that only project success, a shape he has sketched for the PPDC in chalk and holo-screen, even though every time they've had a go at bombing the Breach it has failed, even *though* Hermann's predictive numbers have scared him enough to legitimise the idea of trying it once again even though *it's not going to work*, and Newt *just*—

He spins on the balls of his feet and heads for his own desk, furiously determined. Fine. They don't get it? He'll do it his own way, then. Out of options, and time.

Luckily the only thing to do is a thing that he *wants* to do, no matter what they say - and *fuck* Hermann, it *will* work, he knows it will. To be honest, Newt drinks down his disdain as much as he loathes it; it shows he cares, right? He's been sniping at Newt for so long now but Newt doesn't want it to ever stop, and he loves him even as he sticks a middle finger up at him in his own head, because he *knows* that he needs to do this. So. Screw all of them *and* the equipment he lacks, it's— *it's* - fortune *does* favour the brave! And he'll find a way to get what he needs. Nothing's going to stop him.

No more *dicking* around.

He's doing it.

Maybe he'll die, but maybe not, and if not he can *do* something, great. They're running out of time. He trusts Hermann's math, much as he bitched - *something* is coming, although he wouldn't be so stubbornly certain about what, just that the kaiju this year have been like a wave climbing higher and higher and he's— wait, fuck, that's another water metaphor. Shit. Man, remember when people were worried about *global warming*? Anyway, this.

This could be *it*. At some point, whether it be 2 or 3 or *sixteen* kaiju coming next, they're going to be overwhelmed. The Jaeger programme's ending, even if they have dredged up a strutting, blinkered, golden-haired Pilot from the past to get Gipsy Danger going again, the PPDC's almost *done*, and everyone knows the Wall was never going to work. Just two days before had proven that. Mutavore had broken through it in Sydney in an *hour*. Gasp, shock and horror - except *not*.

That isn't to say it wasn't still a bit of a punch in the teeth to see it crumbling so easily, though, even *as* Newt's mind had been cataloguing the kaiju's mass and bipedal power, its plated skull and the wing-like protrusions along the spine: two on each side, from the scapula, and a larger central arc to protect the spine, anvil-like and *prehistorically* awesome. The way it had hammered through the wall with its head, then rent the space wider with its long arms and powerful shoulders – and those same smaller limbs at the front *again*. All of this had only been a matter of time. Hermann had been next to him muttering the same calculations he was, as they watched. It was inevitable.

Alright, Hermann's math had been a *little* quicker, but still.

Mutavore had come only a few hours before Newt had been due to visit the just-closed Sydney 'dome itself, to reclaim two specimen tanks from the lab. He'd still managed to get over to retrieve them, along with a fresh sample as well - a section of Mutavore's spine, after Striker Eureka had pulverised the category IV kaiju in the middle of the city. And no, it was *professional interest* that sent a pang of disappointment through Newt that they'd been a day late to see the kaiju up close, rather than insanity, as Hermann claimed it was.

This, *this*, coming from Hermann after he'd insisted on coming over to Sydney as well.

"Who *knows* what you'll do, given free rein in a city so recently attacked," he'd said, reaching for his new coat. The *coat*, which, by the way, he knows is Newt's new nemesis and is just wearing to annoy him, no matter how much he protests that is impossible.

It had been a hasty purchase at the end of the year from a market near the 'dome, to do battle against the weather, and Newt is sort of in love with it, and sort of wants to set fire to it, *or* to immortalise it for all time in song. Realistically, you can love something even though you know that it's so, so dumb, right? *Hermann* apparently does. Newt, too. It was cheap, he'd protested with a sniff, when what he *should* have said is, Yes, it is stupid, and adorable, way too *huge* for him even with his long legs, and Newt had almost swallowed his tongue trying not to laugh at its military green – which he can't *really* mock, since they both wear their loves on their sleeves, right – and the giant fluffy hood that basically eats Hermann's head whenever he puts it up. Which is pretty much all of the time, given how much it rains.

So he'd shrugged that on, and given Newt his most imperious look. "I am predicting another kaiju attack soon and cannot be sure that it is not Sydney that will be hit again, particularly with its defences down. *You* should not be unsupervised, there."

"Are you *jealous*, dude?" he'd asked, and Hermann had gone suddenly and frighteningly *still*, withdrawing into the collar of the coat to stare at him.

“I. Of...the kaiju?” he’d asked, voice strained.

Newt had snorted out loud. “*What?* No, man, that I’ve been getting to go off-base so much.”

“Oh. I see. Well. *No*,” he’d answered, dropping his eyes and doing up his zip aggressively.

“Why? What’d *you* mean?” Newt had asked, frowning, but Hermann had just scowled right back at him.

“Irrelevant. *Hurry up*.”

So there was that. And now this. Brand new evidence from Mutavore that was only going to back up exactly what Newt had found out – and how much more physical proof could they possibly want from him, other than showing them chunks of differently aged flesh that are identical? They’re *clones*. Why doesn’t anyone *get* it, they need to find out *why*. But there went Hermann continuing to want to work based on *predictions*. Newt can’t touch that, he can’t *see* it, so no, he can’t trust that alone.

He’s going to Drift.

He busies himself finalising plans he’s had half drawn for a while, and when the unsurprising announcement comes that Gipsy Danger will be having a test run with her new pilots and Hermann leaves the lab, no doubt going up to LOCCENT to nose about it all with Tendo, Newt puts the PONS machine together in a hurried couple of hours, give or take.

Machines are easy, pff.

Most of it comes from their own lab, but the stuff he ‘salvages’ from the lockup definitely clinches it. Maybe he gets a *bit* overexcited in there, what with the 3 flashlights *and* the headtorch, but there is some great shit in there he hasn’t seen for years, including the very useful trolley he drags it all out on.

The processor is the best find. He recognises its source - it used to be part of Shaolin Rogue, a Jaeger that was here and destroyed before they even arrived. Hermann had been prattling about it, once. As Newt wheels it out of the lockup he’s definitely sure that this would be the point where Hermann would be putting his foot down and complaining *endlessly* that this is now morally wrong, but actually, Newt thinks that the Pilots would be pleased to be helping, even after they’re dead.

Then he pauses in the corridor, flashlight still in his teeth, wondering if they’ll be haunting it when he plugs it in, somehow? In the Drift?

...Nope, not a thing he wants to consider on top of the implications of everything *else*.

It takes him a while, when it’s built and he’s running on limited time to *use it*, to find his voice recorder. He has to root through all the drawers and eventually finds it in a desk over on Hermann’s side. Fuck *knows* what he’s been using it for, but Newt doesn’t have time to listen or jump ahead to protect what Hermann’s got on there; he wipes it, leaning against his new machine, muscles in his legs and backs of his shoulders already burning from the exertion, and then presses the red button to record.

Okay.

“Kaiju-human Drift experiment, Take One...”

He grabs the cabling he's found and starts unwinding it as he walks backwards toward the tank, his voice carrying in the empty lab, trying not to tangle himself up in it *and* dictate at the same time.

"The, ah— the brain section is the frontal lobe, um—" He plugs it in with a satisfying and final sort of *click*. "Chances are that the section is far too damaged to Drift with..." - but no, actually, probably not, because he has *done his research*, but you've got to show balance.

Speaking of.

"Unscientific aside: Hermann, if you're listening to this, well I'm either *alive* and I've proven what I've just done works, in which case *ha*, I won. Or—" And this is the worst case scenario but, again, in the interest of a broad and unbiased perspective, "—I'm dead - and I'd like you to know that this is all your fault, it really is, you know you drove me to this, in which case *Ha*, I *also* won. ...Sort of."

That. Might not be the best thing to leave him. But what else can he say? He does think about it for a percentage of a second, skipping over possibilities, adrenaline thumping through him and his stomach a hard knot, but what else to say with words that wouldn't *work*, anyway, and now isn't right and he doesn't— He's thought about it too many times when he'd told himself not to, he always has, but nothing will come now. Hermann will be back soon and just have to find him glowing at the realisation of what he *knows* is going to work, equipped with new information *and* ammunition for one-upping Hermann *forever*, and he'll never need to hear this part of the message anyway, then.

And if Newt's hurt, or if he's - *if* he's dead, then Hermann will be able to make sense of why, maybe, to work through the *slight* mess Newt's left for him and know what to do next. He's done that one before, picking his way through Newt's physical thought-process and tracing a way through the work he's had half written, and then catching up with him. So. Newt needs to stop talking and stop thinking, and press the button.

Anticipation tastes like burnt sugar and his leg wants to start bouncing, he wants to do this so much and he's possibly completely terrified and he could die and he could be about to change the world and he can't stop thinking about an Ian Dury song that Hermann had been listening to weeks ago, one of the few times ever that their musical tastes have intersected in any way, shape or form, and it's ironically fucking named for this situation, which is probably why it's repeating on Newt - because the approaching apocalypse is not exactly a reason to be cheerful, even if wiping the smug look off Hermann's face *is*, if being the first human being ever to Drift with a kaiju brain definitely does make him want to grin - but he's going to start the countdown and there it is, a soundtrack in the back of his head, an internal monologue with a dour London accent telling him he's— Ugh just *do it*—

"Going in, in Three..." (*Too short to be haughty, too nutty to be naughty*)

"Two..." (*Going on 40—*)

"One..." (*No electric **shocks**—*

Newt feels the current zap his temples simultaneously and it's as if the cap *grips* his scalp, sending sparks like *fire* into his skull as he tenses up, his spine arching, his neck locking up. He tries to make a sound but he *can't*—

—*stop grinning even though the water's cold over the top of his boots as he splashes through the*

*river, following Gunter - he explains how to flip the rod and it's as rhythmic as music, like conducting, **easy** - then he teaches Newt how to hold the fish close so it doesn't wriggle out of his grasp but when he's got one cradled against his chest it's so slippery and heavy that he giggles, touching its scales, the curving, perfect pattern that only works against his fingertips one way - Gunter catches his own and hooks it—*

curved claws teeth scales

—up but he never gets around to showing him newt how to gut his own because he just shuffles waist-deep into the river with it in both arms and lets it go, opens his arms to let it swim away and he remembers that the first day in biology when he's—

cut skewer dissect

*—in the lab on a day of teaching as his students listen to him; he's been working almost non-stop in the last few days finishing up his publication on tissue regeneration and he's running over the findings with them, thinking back on the **hours** of anatomy and shiny metallic instruments, the work that had led to this, the first frog he'd learnt on when he was a kid, a test subject he'd dissected down to its—*

flesh muscle sinew bones

down to

its—

bones bones bones cells claws teeth jaws tail heart

lungs brain spine eyes cavity mouth tongue

stitch sinew layer tear change clone sew meld build

created remake perfected built armies copies bodies

masters make teach send show more and more and more

we wait we come we remake we watch we watch we watch

we see we see we see we see we see we see we see we see

we see you we watch you we watch you see you we you see

watch watch see you we see watch see see we you watch you we

see

s e e s e e

w e

s e e

Y O U—

Newt jerks – staggers – drops against the PONS machine as electricity runs down his spine – his body twitches like the frog as he touches it with his – no, that’s – oh *god* there are worse things than kaiju? – *the water’s cold* – his eyes are shut but he can’t shut them he’s biting the sides of his tongue he’s falling he’s – it *hurts* - black engulfs and overwhelms him and he’s

gone.

When Hermann returns to the lab, movement catches his attention immediately, as has always been the way when sharing a space with Newton. Admittedly *most* things with precise shaping will attract his interest - code, hydraulics, algebra, etc. The movement this time, however, is anomalous. Some repetitive twitching, strange—

“*Newton!*”

He’s slumped on the floor against a machine that Hermann has not seen before, jerking, unconscious. His glasses have fallen into his lap, his legs sprawled over the line between their sides of the room with cables twisted over them and behind him like a metallic tail, connected to a three-prong headcap as tight on his skull as his locked grip on the control pad. The button has been pressed down and all Hermann sees is a remote detonator. A *detonator*, because he has done it. That’s a PONS machine.

He Drifted with a kaiju brain.

Oh, God. He might as well have set off a bomb inside his head.

Even as Hermann is rushing forward he is already thinking of skull fractures and the destruction of tissue, a sudden implosion and pinkblue mess—

“*Newton!*” he repeats. “What have you *done?*”

He hops around him when he gets there, letting go of his cane and dropping to his knees, reaching to prop up Newton’s head with one hand immediately, spreading his fingers under his jaw to support it. Oh, oh no no *no*, he thinks, or mouths, or possibly says *aloud*, trying to remember any medical training, going straight for the cap with the other hand instinctively - then with *both* to hit the release, to get it *off*, *get it off*.

Newton’s eyes reflexively scrunch tighter as the metal grips, but his face slackens along with the cap as Hermann wrenches it off and suddenly his eyes snap open, and he sucks in a sharp breath. His nose has started to bleed, one bubble of dark blood spreading down his upper lip, the same as has bled into his left eye where the colour has changed from familiar green to a blurry reddish brown. Hermann stares down at him in shock, his mouth open, feeling utterly *sick*, the cap in one hand, holding the weight of Newton’s head against his body with the other. Trying to prop him up.

“*Hr-mn—?*” Newton breathes.

His blurry, mismatched gaze is unfocussed as he slumps further, eyes lidding a little, but he

recognises Hermann, thank God, that's something.

"Shut up, you *idiot*," Hermann snaps, throwing the cap aside and then fanning his fingers against Newton's throat where his pulse is *racing*, like the drum rhythms on one of those songs he is always listening to, too loudly. Newton twitches again - then his whole body jolts and he reaches out with a horrible gasp, his legs jerking wide as he grabs hold of Hermann by his jacket and shoulder and *yanks* him closer. He is shuddering. His eyes stay fixed open, his jaw hinges and works, his throat stuck. Hermann stares down at him, and feels. Lost.

"H-hive, *hive*," he gets out, *tugging* at Hermann's body. It's terrifying. Hermann swallows, then tips Newton's head carefully against his own to feel the press of it, the thrumming pulse and the clammy skin, the side of his sweaty forehead against his cheek as he tries to hold him still.

"Be *quiet*," he orders, and Newton shudders again, staring at something he can only see in his own head. His fingers curl on Hermann's wrist, holding on too tightly, breathing in through clenched teeth. Hermann wants, immediately, ridiculously, to quit the PPDC, drag Newton somewhere that is at least a thousand miles inland, and lock him in a room with no machinery, and watch him until he falls asleep - and then further, yes, to ensure that he also *re-opens* his eyes. Or, to a hospital. Yes. The *nearest MRI machine*.

"I. I. I need to tell—" Newton tries again, his muscles jumping as if he has been running. Hermann hushes him.

"You *need* to be still. God knows what injury you've done to yourself."

"B—*bossy*," Newton breathes, then turns his face an inch towards Hermann's chest after a moment, making a small hitch of sound. His nose is cold against the underside of Hermann's jaw. Fear has tightened his gut and his face won't co-operate, but Hermann manages to swallow.

"I must get Pentecost," he says. After a moment, Newton's grip still hasn't relaxed. "...*Newton*."

Newton shakes himself, once, head gently bumping Hermann's jaw, as if freeing himself from something, his shoulders hunching up and then apart before he sags back, and Hermann can move. He drags himself to his feet using the machine to lean on, though his thighs have gone dead and pins and needles shoot agony down his injured leg, but he manages to drag Newton up as well, and gets him into a chair.

"Don't move," he says.

Newton, somehow managing to clumsily fold his glasses up and shove them in his shirt pocket, runs shaking fingers through his hair. "No worries," he mutters, but his legs are twitching non-stop.

Does he *know* that his knees are bouncing? Is that intentional or unconscious? Hermann frowns as he retrieves his cane, then darts across the lab to get him a glass of water. He looks back to watch from the sink as he fills it, though, and thus manages to miss the glass entirely on the first go and drench his wrist instead, leaving his shirt-cuff clinging unpleasantly.

He presses the drink into both of Newton's hands and helps him to curl his fingers around it.

"Drink this, and do not go *anywhere*."

Newton gives him a pained look over the rim, after clacking it against his teeth on his first gulp, as if to say *You've covered that bit already?*

Hermann frowns at him, then rushes away towards LOCCENT.

He's going to have to interrupt the Marshall as his adopted daughter has her first test run in Gipsy Danger, he thinks, as he runs, leaning heavily on his cane – how terrible, but needs must.

Newton *always* has such terrible timing.

Hermann still feels sick.

“This? Is a horribly stupid idea, even for you,” Hermann tells Newt, after Pentecost has left.

He's a bit busy to stop, actually, shoving the card with Hannibal Chau's symbol on it into his back pocket and trying to remember where the fuck he put his UV flashlight. He's *wired* and excited and determined, even if his headache is thumping enough to make him consider aspirin, and Hermann's just being pissy - he's *alive* and he did it and he knows so much, *so much* more about the kaiju than ever before – no, *no*, he knows more about them than *anyone* on the planet ever has. Still. *More so*.

The brain he drifted with in the lab was preserved and still moving but, in essence, dead; alone, like a switch between it and the hive mind stuck on open, only able to store images but nothing new. He hadn't seen *future*, only now and past, and it wasn't *enough* – just snapshots, past fragments. Memories are just connections between tissue and cells and he'd blasted through those, seen them as preserved by the chemicals. A live brain, though. Imagine what a truly *live* brain with up-to-date information, in the pulsing *present* could have.

Hermann *had* been taciturn and watchful during the conversation with Pentecost, probably because he got ordered to shut up and he takes any order from the Marshall like it's been written in blood - but also, sure, probably in part from the shock of finding him, and Newt really does apologise to him in his head, *again* – but now? *Now* he's moved on to making his thoughts known at the worst time possible. Like *always*.

Newt's in a *rush*.

He grimaces at Hermann before ducking to look under his desk, but his lab partner just keeps *talking*.

“It is, in fact, an idea so foolish that it will lead directly to a hundred *more* disasters, I am convinced of it.”

Newt stands up again and glares at Hermann over the ridged section of Mutavore's spine.

“Dude, don't *fractal* me, I'm on a voyage of discovery.”

Hermann sucks air in through his teeth in frustration. “Fractal is not a *verb*, Newton.”

“It is the way *you* use it.”

“You cannot possibly go and see this man!”

His reply flips the pace of the argument, and makes Newt pause. Hermann looks furious, his pale cheeks blotched with spots of colour, his glasses gripped tight in one hand.

“I...” Newt trails off, unsure. To be *fair*, Hermann finding him after he’d passed out in the Drift and woke up tasting metal and blood, his left eye throbbing, can’t have been that fun for him, either, and he’s self-aware enough to know that he didn’t exactly look *good*. And Hermann had looked after him, half-bullied him into consciousness and then a chair and *touched* him; touched him on the neck and the face and let Newt cling a little as he came back to himself in judders and starts. Let Newt push his face into his warm throat. One indulgence he thinks he was absolutely allowed when he’d just faced an entire alien race in his head.

One grip – *taken* by Hermann. Given back.

And fuck knows - no, *Newt* knows, if he’d found Hermann like that he’d probably still be puking up in the corner.

He probably should acknowledge this somehow, out loud, but he doesn’t know what to *say*, and he’s. Kinda *busy*.

“Hermann.” He tilts his head – *carefully*, it hurts too much for big movements, yet. “We’ve gotta know more, I can’t just *stop*, buddy.”

“It’s far too dangerous. Obviously. You will kill yourself.” It’s quieter this time, than before. Newt prefers the dramatics. Way easier to deal with.

“You said that before and look - still alive and kicking!”

Hermann raises an eyebrow.

“Well.” He pauses, reaching for his jacket from the back of his chair. “Maybe not *kicking*. Yet! Give me time and a Red Bull, I’ll be good to go.” He grins.

Hermann doesn’t return it, just crosses his arms.

“You are being more of an idiot than normal. Than *ever*, perhaps.”

That’s a *little* harsh. Newt makes a face right back at him. “The risk is *worth* the reward, any ‘idiot’ could see that.”

“No.”

“*No*?” He snorts. “Come *on*, pushing the envelope is what science *is*, dude - you know it as well as I do.”

Hermann scoffs. “*Please* do not use mathematical terms that you don’t understand as justification for your actions.”

“What, you need *examples*? You and Pi, you *irrational numbers*, you want proof? You want to talk about, about, okay, Vesalius and going against the accepted grain of *anatomy*—”

“Of course *you* start with dissection—”

“Or Darwin, or Röntgen, or Galileo, or Lovelace, or Hypatia—”

“Who was *murdered*—”

“Okay, Da Vinci, there’s some trying to think outside the box for you—”

“*Predictable* and ill-fitting, no real risk—”

“—the Curies, creating radium in a *bowl*—”

Hermann laughs, once, harshly, and that stops him. “Finally, an appropriate analogy, given the terminal effects.”

“Oh my *god*.” Newt has to laugh as well, a sort of splutter, because *shit* Hermann is on *form* and that can only mean Newt has rattled him extra badly. “I’m *fine*, Hermann, and you know, though it’s nice to see you *care*, you’ve got a pretty shitty way of going about it.”

Hermann *hisses*. He’s gripping his glasses so tightly now that the frames are bending. “How about this example, then, you *child*,” he says. “Archimedes took a *bath*, he didn’t *fill it* with *acid first*—”

“Okay you’re being weird about this, and I’m going,” Newt interrupts, and heads for the door. “Go and boss your way up to LOCCENT and Tendo so that you know what’s going on, since we both know you’re going to do that either way, and I’ll be back later when I’ve saved the world.”

“Newton— *Newton*, wait!” Hermann catches his arm and *pulls*.

Newt turns, annoyed, but then it switches to confusion; Hermann’s leapt forward without his cane, which is still leaning against the console where Pentecost had got them to bring up the image of Chau, and now he’s sort of *too* close, his eyes big and golden, his face sort of stricken and open, his lower lip caught in his teeth. He works at it as Newt watches, briefly. It makes his head throb.

“What’s up?” he asks, carefully. His throat feels thick.

“I...” Hermann’s hand closes on his arm again, squeezing, his gaze flicking down to Newt’s mouth. Woah, is that... *woah*, what—Newt’s head throbs again, and he swallows. Hermann does the same, then blinks, and gives a tiny sigh, letting him go so that he can put a hand in his own pocket.

“Your nose is bleeding again,” he says, quietly, handing Newt a white handkerchief.

Newt takes it, feeling, as he does, the trickle of warmth on his upper lip and the taste of plasma and platelets again. He steps back to wipe it away, shakily. No more follows, at least. Hermann watches him silently, his mouth all twisted up, and Newt feels fairly exposed already without those *eyes* on him, thanks. He folds the edges of the handkerchief over the stain of dark blood on it, mostly, and offers it back to Hermann - who steps back as well, wincing.

“Oh, no,” he can’t stop himself grimacing - then stops, and shares a slightly wry smile with Newt about it, aware of his reaction. “I— You keep it. You may well need it again.”

“Not gonna argue with that,” Newt concedes, putting it in his pocket.

He claps Hermann on the shoulder after a second, awkwardly, trying to be encouraging, but he’s got to go.

“Time to find a brain,” he says, leaving the joke about his own unspoken, as a sort of peace-maker.

Hermann doesn’t take the bait.

“Please do *try* not to die,” he calls after him.

Newt throws a shaky salute in response, setting off at a run down the corridor - and it’s not that he’s running away, no, it just *feels* a bit like it, but *that* was a whole bunch of things he both wants to investigate *and* possibly never risk asking, what the *fuck*, why can’t Hermann ever say things

like a *normal* person, what did any of that mean, and what the fuck is Newt doing, now? Oh. Right. Yeah. Looking for some underground boss in the pouring rain so that he can Drift with the kaiju again.

Great.

After Newton has left, probably to get *murdered* by black market magnates before discovering anything useful whatsoever, Hermann stays working in the lab for a while, stubbornly, but he cannot concentrate. His mind skitters and jumps, his fingers are unsteady; one moment tapping against his calculations, the next touching his mouth, half in disturbed reminiscence of the blood on Newton's upper lip and his *grip* on Hermann, and half in distracted thought. Potentials, what-ifs.

It feels strange in the room; too empty, yet paradoxically overlain with residual discomfort.

He keeps eyeing the PONS machine sideways, until he gives up.

By the time he gets up to LOCCENT it's chaos, with everyone working to restore what was turned off in the wake of Miss Mori's disastrous first attempt in Gipsy Danger. Hermann feels horribly for her; she wants so *much* to be a Pilot. He also cannot help but be unsurprised, however; the carnage in her past was never going to make delving into her memories with someone particularly *smooth*.

This does not mean that he thinks she should not try again, however. For now the Marshall seems to determined to ground her, from what he can tell, having seen her still sitting in the mess hall when he'd cut through it on his way there – though *Raleigh Becket* seems to have been cheering her, somewhat, when he'd glanced back with a frown.

Privately, Hermann thinks they ought to be getting every available Pilot ready, no matter how inexperienced - there *will* be *three* kaiju coming through the breach soon, whilst Newton's off trying to track down another brain fragment, and apparently these kaiju are being sent on *orders*, which, whether true or not, the orders *here* have too many people *sitting still*.

He kicks Tendo's chair when he has explained this, and the officer's only response is to *chill, brother*.

Tendo catches himself on his console when he spins away, and pushes himself back with a raised eyebrow.

“Okay, *Hermann*. I'm getting the feeling that you're having a bad afternoon—”

“Isn't *everyone*?” he snaps, throwing an expansive gesture towards the view screens. “There are *more kaiju* coming, Newton's probably going to have an aneurism whilst off on this wild bloody goose chase for a *criminal*, and I...” He goes wobbly for a second, and trails off, covering his face with a hand and dropping heavily into a spare chair, his cane clattering against the arm, adrenaline flooding out of him with little warning.

“Yes,” he sighs, eyes closing, legs suddenly strangely empty. “A bad *day*.”

Tendo leans forward after a pause, his chair creaking, and puts a hand on his arm.

“Quit worrying. From what I hear, he got through it in one piece, right?”

"I'm not worrying about *Newton*," Hermann says, dropping his hand, "I am dreading the inevitable *triple event* I have been warning everyone about for *days*."

Tendo raises his eyebrows again, then busies himself tugging on his bow tie to straighten it, grinning, when Hermann glares at him.

"Right." He claps his hands on his thighs, getting up. "*You* need coffee, and so do I."

"I'm fine," Hermann tries to protest, but Tendo is already looking around.

"Yup, sure. Bagel? I think I saw some in J-Tech, today; you know Hector brings them in sometimes."

"...Just coffee will suffice."

Tendo laughs. "Got it."

Of course, just as he returns with four mugs and a bagel jammed in his mouth, the sensors begin to announce a double event.

Hermann looks up with a start from the machine he's borrowing as Tendo pauses and turns, too slowly, towards the seismograph. When Hermann jumps up and slides across onto the console to read the outlay as it comes, he finally seems to catch up.

Two category IVs.

"There should be *three*," he mutters, eyes scanning the readings, as Tendo finally throws the mugs down next to him and reaches for the microphone. Coffee slops down over the 45 degree angle of the back of the console. Tendo's eyes are wide as they glance at him.

"*Two* isn't enough for you?!" he says, strangled, then shakes his head before Hermann can answer and announces the event to the entire Shatterdome, calling everyone relevant to LOCCENT.

The resultant battle between the three Jaeger and two kaiju is horrific to watch, and *watch* Hermann has to, one leg jiggling slightly as he stands next to Mako and her new co-pilot, watching the Marshall, Tendo and Ranger Hansen - like *Newton* might, yes, but partly trying to work away the ache in it from crouching down on it for too long earlier that morning and partly out of sheer *discomfort*, observing the battle between Leatherback, Otachi and the Weis.

The *Weis*.

The thud of dread as the kaiju rips and smashes through the top of Crimson Typhoon and the Jaeger goes down ripples across the room, and burns in his own chest, perhaps something like the acid the kaiju spits at the head of Cherno Alpha barely a few minutes later, as Hermann is *still* trying to wrap his mind around the fact that the Weis are unquestionably dead.

They're younger than he was when he started in the PPDC. They were. Will always be. *Cheung* and his brothers.

Hermann wants to call his own, urgently. He wants to call Vanessa and talk about nothing. He wants to call *Newton*. Then Pentecost is prowling in front of the viewscreen as Cherno Alpha goes down, flooding with water and sinking in a mess of bubbles and foam, waves slapping around as the kaiju leap and dive, and Hermann has to fight against rising bile again. How *awful*. Somehow insulting, too, he imagines, after years of fighting, to *drown*, of all things.

It's no surprise, all of this. Having predicted it doesn't make it any *easier*, though.

When the electromagnetic pulse rushes over them, it leaves the hairs on his arms standing up and his teeth on edge. At first it's just surprise, and he splutters along with rest, *What was that?* - but then he *realises*. It is uncannily like having Newton's unusual voice in his head and coming out of his own mouth, but he knows absolutely what is true, in the static shock left after all of the screens and lights have blinked out.

"They're *adapting*. This isn't a defence mechanism, it's a *weapon*," he observes. One that Newton, no doubt, would be doing cartwheels over.

Or would he, after the Kaidanovskys have been drowned?

Perhaps not.

Perhaps he's requisitioning brain fragments as they speak. Perhaps he's twitching on an alley floor with a knife in his spine. Perhaps he's about to be crushed by whichever kaiju is now heading for the *city*, who bloody *knows* anymore? *Hermann* had known, mathematically, that this was going to get worse, but this has outdone even his predictions. If Newton dies before Hermann gets to tell him that the kaiju can do *this* now, and that he doesn't actually hate him, in any way, that he actually thinks that he is, conversely, lovely, and appalling, that he desperately needs to kiss him regardless of how Newton might react, that fear of his loss has turned Hermann into a stuttering-hearted, uncertain extension of himself, grabbing him and almost doing utterly *pointless* things, though quite *what* he's still not sure, then Hermann will— oh, Hermann will.

Forget Drifting, Hermann will *lobotomise him*, himself.

In hindsight, calling the massive black-market boss a one-eyed bitch might not have been Newt's most intelligent moment. But with smashed glasses, a stinging gash on his forehead, sopping wet clothes and bio-luminescence still sparking in his vision, he'd felt pretty fucking rockstar doing it. So. *Worth it*.

He also managed not to throw up *at* Chau's, just *outside* instead, and okay, his hands still won't stop shaking, but Chau doesn't look at him quite so much like he's going to throw him over a balcony, so he chalks that up as a win for the day.

He also *hadn't* pissed his pants when the kaiju tongue at least six times the length of him had unfurled like a flower and *scented* the air in front of him, after the roof of the basement shelter had collapsed inward at his feet and it had *found him* through his apparent unseen connection to a hive monster mind, so that one might have been.

Holy shit.

Holy *shit*.

He's never been this sinew-tinglingly *terrified* in his entire life. Cliché moment: he's also never felt so alive? And he never wants to see a kaiju *exactly* that close again - whilst it's still alive, at least, which feels like a death in its own way, of his past self, a *pre-Drift* self. Maybe in some *alternate* universe he still wants one, wild as it is, but here, every part of him is in tacit agreement on Nope. *Unless* they can find a way of containing one. Controlling it, perhaps, reprogramming it, giving it

other orders than those it has – but for now, he can't imagine how. Isn't supposed to.

Deal with the problem on the page, right.

It had been a billion times more incredible close-up than he could ever have thought, though. Beautiful. Mind-blowing, horrifying, a hazy sight through concrete dust from his dreams *and* nightmares, the snap and slam of its enormous jaws, bug-eyed and hunch-shouldered with awkward, vicious limbs and the whip of its *tongue*. Which is the kind of thing he's seen a lot of porn about and he really does hate himself that that was one of the things he was thinking as it was reaching for him, but that's his life, yep, that somehow, *somewhere*, deep in one of the chambers in his mind, there he was about to die and yet he was also thinking I've Seen Hentai Like This - but that's the price of being a genius like he is, the alternately brilliant and terrible, the fact that *his* type of almost unbalanced brain just keeps *going*, multi-tasking even when it should stop, rest, even when about to be wrapped up and squeezed in chemical colour.

Finally, and quickly, slow and real time colliding into a mush in a near-death moment, the sound of its screech reverberating and the thud of a Jaeger's approach and all of that pertinent *terror* had wiped his mind blissfully clear, leaving little behind but the ability to wide-eyed, tremblingly, *stare*. The kaiju turned away with a roar and the earth shook, the shadows bouncing all over from the streetlight hanging over the hole. Up the slope of what used to be a street Newt had seen the long spine, the huge split tail, the bony protrusion of spikes on each joint, and what looked like the angular potential for *wings* – and, fuck, Gipsy Danger, behind it.

Mako, he thinks. It *must* have been, right? He was even happy to think it was *Becket* in there, too.

Then he'd run.

Next time he sees the kaiju, he's really happy with it being dead. Or, if it has to be alive, then for *him* to already be a corpse so that he *can't* be killed again, and therefore his non-corporeal self can float around enjoying the view with no physical risk. Because they're so amazing. *So fucking amazing*. But, if he wasn't painfully aware that they are way too much for fragile, human synapses and skeletons to deal with, he really is now.

They were *built* that way, after all.

To specifically target, crush, and destroy, for the orchestrators behind them.

Fuck.

When he's made it back to Chau's, and made his case, he gets jammed in the back of a pretty sweet jeep with Chau and all his lackeys. His phone was smashed in the shelter, so he prods and pleads until the *very* hot woman with a shaved head and face like a knife (and a *sweet* kaiju tatt on her right bicep which means he will forgive her *anything*) grunts with frustration, and lends him hers.

Hermann picks up on the second ring.

"You're still in one piece?" he says, sharply. It sounds like he's outside; Newt can hear the rain down the line as well as spattering on the roof of the jeep, in a weird sort of pre-echo that messes with his already frazzled head.

"Mostly. I-I'm on the way to the death site now - can you send my machine over?"

"Pentecost already authorised it. We're on the way."

We. Newt wasn't going to ask – way too obvious – but he'd *hoped* Hermann would find a way to

insist he get over there, too, even if it was just to come and point out all of the things he's doing wrong.

A friendly-ish face would be *so* good right now. Post near-death experience, and all.

Who is he kidding; he wants to see his *favourite* face, glaring at him.

When that had become a thing that makes him feel *safe*, he doesn't want to know.

"...Great. Great, thanks."

"Yes." Rustling, as Hermann calls out in terrible Cantonese, and then the whir of helicopter blades begins, in the background, the slow *woomp woomp* as they start up. "I will be there soon—"

"I'll be sooner. Did you see it, Hermann?"

"Of *course*," Hermann says, annoyed. As if he'd let anything pass him by. "Wings and all. I..." He clears his throat. "Otachi is the code name, by the way. I'm sure *you'd* wish to know."

Actually Newt wants to call it *his* kaiju, can he say that? It nearly ate his face, after all, that's a connection, right? He's not going to say *that* though. Instead he says, "Cool. I gotta go."

"Newto—!"

He hangs up before Hermann can finish – knifeface is eyeballing him, sullenly, chin in hand and tapping long nails on her own cheek. He grins and throws the phone back.

Her reflexes are scary.

The noise when they get to the death site is epic. The amount of people scurrying around, lights whirling overhead, wind rushing and machinery coming in, ammonia tanks rumbling. It seems unruly but Chau barks orders and everything seems to run from him. What with all of that *and* the reverberation-echoes of the voices of the kaiju and their *masters* in Newt's mind, the collective rage that had been directed his way through an electric cable and a transdimensional breach, it's a fucking *party* in his aching brain. All of this *and* he's got the Monster Mash stuck in his head, now. Kill him, *kill him*. Only don't, of course, because he's got to Drift again.

He rubs his temples briefly after jumping down from the jeep, then checks his nose again, remembering - but it's not bleeding. Good. Aneurism is so *not* how he wanted to go, but looking more likely, when what he needs is an undamaged brain. Intact brains - both kaiju, main or secondary, he's not *picky*, as well his own. He has a superstitious go at crossing his fingers briefly for it, after he's wiped them across his philtrum, since why it, it can't hurt. Come *on*.

He zeroes in on the clink of Chau's golden shoes, where he's started striding towards Otachi's corpse, and trails after him. He has to run to keep up, trying not to touch anything. Yet.

"Jesus, are your legs *pneumatic*?" he mutters, hop-skipping a step and nearly skidding into Chau when he stops with no warning, whirling to glare at him with his one eye, yanking a walkie-talkie off one his staff.

"*Although*," Newt adds, thinking about it, "that *would* be excellently cool, and I'd be really interested to hear that story one day."

"Do you ever quit *yapping*?" Chau growls.

Newt shrugs, then leans in to listen to the voice down the line as well. Distantly, he's listening for helicopters. Hermann had *better* be there by the time he wakes up from the Drift again. If he wakes up again. He's not going *religious* or anything, here, but if he *were*, he'd put a request out there for that too. Hermann there, to slap him back into certainty.

It's not a *big* ask.

Not that he's asking.

Just. Thinking.

Snatching the communicator off Chau when he hears the rhythmic, tell-tale thud of a heartbeat definitely doesn't involve a lot of logical thinking either, but. Instinct always works just as well for him, most of the time.

Now, for example.

The one that's saying *Oh Verfickte Kackscheiße, run away run away—*

He does.

As Hermann stands there, sat-phone in his hand, surrounded by splattered Blue and strangers, the wind whipping his hair, far too close to a freshly dead and still fairly *foetal* kaiju for his own comfort, or sanity - he tries to work through the words, the *frustration*, focusing on the one, unfortunate, wonderful constant from the last almost decade of his life:

Dr. Newton Geiszler, scampering around the rubbish and a *corpse*, to set up a second Drift.

The relief at seeing him still whole and '*mostly*' undamaged is tempered by the burning rage, and residual sadness, and terror, and exhaustion. All of that, and more.

There is fresh blood on Newton's shirt front. His cheek is scraped, a gash on his forehead. And:

"Hermann!" he is *yelling*, and Hermann scowls. "I haven't exactly had a very good day, okay, and I've got about *five minutes—*"

He pushes the pronged cable through an under-developed cranium with all the effort his slight body can create, boots braced against the kaiju's flesh and looking even smaller than normal on its back. Grit crunches under Hermann's cane and shoes - once clean, now utterly ruined, he will have to *throw them away* - as he moves, shifting whilst he thinks. And is *annoyed*. He re-pictures the maths, trying to recreate the shape of it in his mind, thinking of the *equations...*

"Should be *three*," he mutters to himself, perturbed, but Newton is continuing to chatter.

"—before brain death occurs here - I don't want to spend it talking about your theories!"

Hermann pulls a face, following the pull of Newton's trajectory as he skitters down the kaiju's face like it is a *playground* and jumps back to the floor, then strides with purpose towards his Drift machine. The smell of ammonia is sharp, along with the burn of fear and annoyance that he's just been told it is two – two, not *three*, which he knows is wrong—

“They have it *all wrong*; there should *three* kaijus coming through, not two!”

Newton ignores him and listens to him at the same time, repetitively adjusting his glasses as he throws himself at the keyboard. “*Oh* there should be *three*, there’s *two*, I’m sorry, it has to be wrong, don’t it—”

Yes, yes, absolutely yes. Hermann checked his model and his maths, and checked again; he worked and recalibrated this for months, for years - it is *perfection*. He built it, mentally, he diagrammed it, he programmed it, he worked as close to physically as he could get with his hands – he even let his eyes lose focus, he let himself fall into that place of shapes and colour, again, relying on it as he hasn’t let himself since he was a child. He’d worked so hard to recall something that he has actually ordered and boxed up so tightly that it needed prying open, and he risked doing it *in the lab* with *Newton there* - more than once - to try and find the answers. Newton didn’t even notice. Hermann has never felt this...safe, around someone before. This constant. This *person* who has already *stupidly* risked Drifting once, and still bears the marks of it, and is going to do it again.

A week ago when Hermann realised his model *was* perfect, and the true image of what was coming resolved itself into undeniable written form, he had slumped down hard, and suddenly, against his desk. Watching Newton work furiously towards something so dangerous, again, feels like that.

So. “I am *not wrong*,” he insists, “but there is something here that we don’t understand—”

“Okay, Hermann, hopefully we can argue about any mistakes you made in your predictive model in the future—” The optimism and antagonism rolls so easily off his tongue that Hermann wants to *smack him with his cane* “—but in the meantime, the neural interface is *way* off the charts! If you wanna help, help with that!”

Oh no. *No*. One does *not* bloody think so. “Newton I am *not wrong*.” He knows this. He needs to *know* this. “There *is* only one way to make sure,” he adds - both realising and accepting the logical next course of action.

There are a number of explanations. Most significant are two.

One: ensuring that Newton does not have the entirely plausible brain-bleed that Hermann has feared he will, since finding him twitching on their lab floor a few hours earlier - *their* lab floor, rather than alone, so that Hermann would find him. This much of Newton’s methods is clear to him. The familiarity, the *understanding* of it was both touching and troublesome, hitting bone, hitting far too close to home.

And the other: partly, perhaps as *equally*, perhaps *moreso*, because of the vicious curiosity that Hermann has always had as well. There will be the Breach, and he has to see that - he has to *understand*. He has to be correct. He has to *know*, and he has to know *with* Newton. With him, he is better equipped. He is more comfortable. He knows that, now. Has for a long time, perhaps.

The course of action can only be thus - to Drift with an apparently entire-specied hive mind, and Newton, to ensure they both come out of it with the right information.

To Drift with *Newton*.

Which Hermann is most curious about, he is not sure. He fears it and he wants to *see*, as well. Horrifying as the concept might be, he knows by now that he will look at any shape of what Newton is and probably not be surprised, that he will happily examine what the Breach contains, in order to understand, in order to fight with him, in order to *end it*. It’s high time they did. He wants a future.

Hermann just. Gives up.

He wants *in*.

He turns to the keyboard, flicks his glasses up onto his nose and gets to work, explaining - “And that is to do this...” His hands are steady as he types frenetically and Newton continues to busy himself with cables, back turned to him, totally unaware of Hermann’s process. They have both become so *skilled* at ignoring *and* being attentive to one another, other their nine years.

Hermann hits the right key, turns, and takes his glasses off – declarations are better if one stands tall, sets one’s shoulders. “...*Together*.”

Newton must know this too, because he stops moving. Straightening up, he starts to turn.

“I’ll go with you,” Hermann finishes. Adds. In case that wasn’t clear.

Newton, now facing him, doesn’t say *a word*, just frowns at Hermann with his mouth gone soft, the wind whipping up his hair. It’s incongruous, it’s wrong – he would have predicted immediate shouting. Hermann feels...exposed, suddenly. Has he shown too much? “That’s what the Jaeger pilots do.” He needs to explain, perhaps Newton needs more data – perhaps his brain is damaged, truly. The alternative is Hermann is being *transparent*. “S-share the neural load.”

Newton looks at the screen, then back at Hermann.

“You’re serious?” he asks. “You would do that for me? Or—” Hermann shifts back and forward on his feet and aching knee, *nervous*, resolved, as Newton licks his lower lip once, stopping himself as his brain obviously hesitates as well. *Feelings*. Awful. “You would, you would do that *with* me?”

He is making it equal. He is giving Hermann a place next to him. Hermann is touched and, insanely, *excited*. Yes. For him, with him, *yes*. This has been the past decade of his life. Not to mention that Newton is not the *only* one who ought to get that experience, that knowledge - he is *not* surging ahead of Hermann again on this one. Hermann is perfectly capable of saving the bloody world as well.

“Well, with world-wide destruction a certain alternative...do I really have a choice?” He makes a joke, and not a bad one, allowing his smile to come through. Perhaps it twists, as he is a little embarrassed, but it is wry. Genuine.

Newton’s eyes widen in answer and he leans forward, lifting his hand for some sort of shake. “Then say it with me, my man! We’re gonna *own* this bad boy!”

Oh, God. Hermann wants to laugh, but his amusement is true - Newton is so fervent, so driven, so lovely, and though this is *exactly* the sort of thing he used to do with Joe and Soo-jin and Anya and Agnieszka and Harold and all the other various team members they’ve had, and lost, whittled down to just the two of them now - though it is *exactly* what he *knows* that Hermann doesn’t feel comfortable with, Hermann still finds himself grinning, ridiculously. Because that is Newton, the very essence of him, no sense of propriety or embarrassment, suggesting things to Hermann with absolutely no shame.

And Hermann...*loves* it.

He reaches out, touches the sides of Newton’s fingers, grips the tips, no, that’s not— perhaps a different fit – he twists his wrist and gives up and just taps Newt’s knuckles excitedly, his hands fluttering like his pulse as it jumps.

“By jove,” he says, and believes it, “we are going to *own* this thing for *sure*!”

Newton once told him that he drags him kicking and screaming into reality – well, now they’re diving into a hive-mind and Hermann, insanely, feels that frisson of *something* between them, again. A pre-Drift connection perhaps - but how *rare* it is for them to be on the same page at the same time, so quickly. Normally this takes much longer, more discussion, more arguments before that understanding clicks in his throat as Newton looks at him, *getting* it, or he watches Newton realise what he already has, or when he suddenly works out what Newton has already thought, and is waiting for him, to. He’s overthinking it. He can feel Newton wanting to tell him not to overthink it. He doesn’t *want* to overthink it. He wants to touch Newton.

He feels more *driven* than he has, suddenly, for years.

Newton grabs his fingers and squeezes them just as he does the same, and *laughs*.

By the time Newton’s worked him up a matching PONS helmet, however, his feelings of mirth have died off. He fastens it on, stands next to Newton, and wonders if perhaps he is about to destroy his best asset, and the best weapon he has to fight the kaiju with. Newton is determined, however. Thus, so is he.

“Initiating neural handshake in—”

Hermann works his jaw nervously before it begins, with Newton standing next to him.

“— five...”

They are about to connect their *minds*, along with aliens.

“Four...”

The Drift—

“Three...”

— will be horrendous, he must prepare himself for that, or—

“Two—” – it might be bearable, if he can remember—

“...One” – though of course there is the worry that Newton might *see*—

He takes a rushed breath and a jolt goes through the kaiju as Newton makes a noise next to him, *teeth clenched*, but Hermann can’t do that because his *skull* sparks alight and it’s a mess of heartbeats and horror at once, as his spine locks and pain runs down it and his leg and the ice is burning his skin again – it’s a tangled mix of Newton and himself and the Hive mind behind reaching through the Breach to grip their skulls, the cap feels suddenly *tight* and it’s —

o h

it’s as though something is prising his cranium apart to rend to drink to vomit acidic images into their minds it hurts it’s *strong* it’s gliding through the ocean perfectly through dark and shades of blue—

blue

—*blue tips to the wings of his model plane would look beautiful, he thinks, what with its perfectly plotted angles; he loves the robot too but this is the **best** toy, so cleanly built and designed - he runs*

around with it in the garden before Dietrich comes out with a helmet that's too big and puts it onto his head, waves away his scowl to point to the neighbour's wall, grinning - oh he **could** be a pilot, yes, the navigation gauges look just like how he sees things already: the engineering, the equations, the numbers all in roulette curves and lines with their own co-ordinates and shapes, the linear algebra, the angles and triangles – Hermann can see all these inside his mind and he realises that thinking, using numbers, is just like navigating the spaces and shapes they make, like geometry, and that's **easy**, so he thinks the way a plane flies must feel the same—

—the same as him, these people feel **the same way** as him, and maybe they're pretty much all women here and he's one of only two guys but that's just even better; he is a fucking feminist whatever anyone says and he can be that because it's **right**, which everyone at this protest agrees with, the **idea**, and that feeling of actually being like everybody else is so new and different that he almost can't believe it - that for once that he's not on his own here, but he also is, he's not so strange but he **is**, and yeah he will shout for this, this cause, they're here together, he's not so completely alone and yet fuck you he's still unique, he's a **rock star**, he's not a—

clone we clone we remake we re-perfect and re-perfect again we are

one we see you we will get into that world we rend destroy the sound

of screaming tinny and tiny the colours are too obvious too weak too

—**easy** to even really tax his mind, this problem; the numbers comes in connected forms as he writes out the answer on the whiteboard, the pen squeaking occasionally - but when he turns around the other boys seem surprised, and everyone is silent, and the teacher's mouth is slack – did he...did he do something wrong? oh no, he glances back and the numbers are bright and stark in the green pen he was given and it looks too vivid, whiteboards are horrible, he's so embarrassed, did he miss a digit, or... they look angry, did he—

—work all night again? he looks up and he's nearly finished dissertation number 5 and he's damn happy with this one, that is one fucking A+ bit of work but oh, yeah, he **did**, it's 11am, oh **man** – so no wonder his eyes ache and his head suddenly swims when he thinks about it, but he didn't even **notice** - and he still wants to do **more** - this is where he's going to be, forever, this is what he was made for, but is he always going to feel this way? is his mind evergoing to be **full**? he's suddenly so tired and scared of it, of himself - will he ever get a break from all that he can and wants to do, will his **brain**—

matter organs guts we add voices to roar crush flatten make room for us

we will never stop we come we come we will eat kill use we will have we

will own destroy create we will crunch bite take use we will reach

—under the door to get him in the bathroom stall, so he heads to the library instead and slips behind the curtain into the back room where it smells of dust and distant vanilla; he sits in the corner on the floor where it's quiet and he tries not to rock and buries his head in his arms, instead - it's cold and he's so **tired** but he'll never sleep with all the taunts going around and around in his mind anyway, disrupting the patterns, the noise—

—of his own voice as he records his findings in the lab after everyone's left, even Gottlieb, who's usually there as late as he is, but now it's just him and the empty glass and chemicals, and if it's so 'odd' to talk to take notes the way he does, well then he's odd, fine, because he **loves**—

—bringing the slide rule as close to his eyes as possible, to really **examine** the numbers, the pleasing clarity and the simple, age-old proof of life, of what he **knows** laid out so neatly - though it is frustrating that he seems to be having to move these even closer, recently; he does hope that Newton hasn't noticed but he probably has, the man seems to notice **everything** that he dislikes about himself, and he most definitely hopes this does not mean he will have to get glasses, but undeniably his eyes ache when the bright—

electric flash cracks open closes again floods lightning static

bubbles break all are one all speak all roar a war to win we

fight all body we kill silicone bone stretch you your blood

—wells up during his first tattoo session before she wipes it away but not too much - he'd expected more so he's perversely proud of himself, and it feels like the burns and scratches where the needle drags, moves away, comes back - like the black lines starting to take shape were **always there** underneath, that the needle's just scraping away the top surface to show it - like he's a scratchcard, like he could be someone's lucky number, like this is really **who he is** underneath - that's how he's feeling, here, some stinging realisation of his life and he **loves** it so much he gets hard in the sticky leather seat, but his tattooist just glances sideways at his boner and smirks, so he grins shakily back, and she just keeps going; she's seen it **all**, probably, seen—

—this Snellen chart before, for certain - it's the same one they used to test his eyes when he was a child, he may not have an entirely **eidetic** memory but some things **do** stick, and this looks exactly the same 20 years later - but then, it isn't letters that he sees strangely, it is **numbers**, and either way he's just here for **reading** glasses, having made the choice to come himself, not a child sent by his confused parents this time, so: he takes a breath, recites what he needs and what he actually **can**, as a lot more is depressingly blurry than it was in the past - and if he is also thinking ahead to what pair he might get, what style, and that he ought not to get anything too like Newton's because that could seem pathetic, well, no-one need—

know we know what will work what we need we create we

reuse we wait we make we work we build we twist we code

stitch and splice and sew and layer every piece that works

we draw again make flesh made body static burn electric

rend tear create recreate perfect remake run claws down

flesh body acid life bone sinew push through

each part each section moves we come closer we direct

we approach

we see

we see we wait we know we never stop we see we

are we are we are

we A RE

CLOSE—

The connection closes with a snap and Hermann comes back to his body, his feet on the ground, his muscles shuddering, his eyes rolled back into his head.

“Are you okay?!” Newton shouts, next to him, and the sound is painful, ringing in his brain, in his *bones*. Blood, warm and sticky and bitter, is running onto his lips, and his left eye throbs as he swallows and manages to nod. Vaguely, distractedly, he undoes the chin strap.

“Yes, of course,” he says, with odd bravado that may not be his own. Newton seems to be all right – the second time is not so bad, perhaps? Not that he *ever* wants to do that again.

Hermann drags the helmet off and has perhaps never felt quite so sweaty, clammy and *hot* at the same time. His legs are trembling. “Completely fine,” he adds.

Then he has to be sick, immediately.

Of course.

The toilet is distressingly well-placed and normally he would not so much as touch it with his *cane*, but at that moment it is like it was meant to be there. He’d also be embarrassed if he could muster the ability to care; as it is, Newton passes him the handkerchief before Hermann even completes the gesture for it. He did only just give it to him, after all. No. It was hours before. The memory of what was *then* and the understanding of what is *now* are blurring and he felt the knowledge of it as if it was still in his own pocket, knew it was, knew that he could pass it on, how strange, like being in two places at once – yet oddly, this sudden, undefinable mental connection he can feel between them, whether it is actual or imagined, whether it is just a placebo, it is possibly the only thing stopping him from falling into the terror and screaming, *screaming*—

He turns, quickly, wiping his mouth. “The Drift,” he gasps. “You saw it?”

Newton nods, quickly, straightening his glasses reflexively – nervous, that means he’s overwhelmed, but also that he’s thinking, that he’s thinking *ahead*— “Yeah.”

He cannot *possibly* be this calm about it, Hermann thinks— “Did you?!”

“Yeah.” He waves that away. “L-L-Listen, we have to warn them,” Newton says, arms heavy by his sides, then he gestures suddenly, leaning in; they are both moving around too quickly. Intent. *Scared*. “The Jaeger...the Breach—” He swallows as though there are too many words and Hermann *knows*, because he can hear them— “The, the *plan*—”

Hermann interrupts, finishes, to agree with him. “It’s *not going to work!*”

Finishing each others’ sentences is new. They normally interrupt but they never *complete*. They stare at each other for a second, breathing heavily, wavering, still unsure exactly of what the last moments of any of it were and laden down with the *knowledge*, then nod and—

Run.

On reaching the helicopter, they both try to let the other go in first; then, after a strangled noise of frustration, move at the same time and get stuck in the doorway. Newton grins at him as they

clamber in, and Hermann tutts because now is not the time, and because he wants to chase the rhythm of that across his face with his fingertips and see if it feels like he imagines – to trace the angles *and* the taste of raspberry, which is to say that yes, his senses are going *haywire*, his synaesthesia bumping up against what must be Newton's need to touch everything, and one of their preferences for tart berries. He thinks that's his own. He cannot recall. It's better than thinking about the taste of pulverised flesh and concrete and metal and seawater, or he will be sick again.

They sit and wait, flying back. Hermann smudges the blood from his upper lip with his fingertips, then goes to wipe his fingers clean on the fabric of his thighs because it seems like the right thing to do, before remembering *himself*, remembering that no, that's disgusting, and he still has the *handkerchief* in his hand. He cleans off his fingers, and thinks about offering it to Newton, but when he turns to check, his lab partner has already tipped his own head back, pinching the bridge of his nose, letting the sluggish blood trail down his throat.

"Newton," he admonishes, appalled, his mouth open. Touched? Confused. Protective. "That is— That is hideous, surely you ought to know—"

"You were just in my brain, Hermann," Newt says thickly, though he drops his head to give him a tight smile. "I'm pretty sure you know that I don't care if this is 'okay'."

Normally Hermann would complain some more, but he cannot. Newton's morbid accepting of, and fascination with, the taste of his own blood is strange, but less than surprising. Somehow he already *knew it*. Newton feels exactly different and completely the same as he always did. The connection between them had been brutal and brief, before the kaiju had forced their way through it and taken over so quickly, that it is something like having stopped halfway through the puzzling of an equation - there was *more*, he is sure. Still, Hermann thinks that he knows Newton a little better, yes, and the *resonance* of that is unexpected. He even sees the logic of the action – where *could* he wipe the blood, now that Hermann has the handkerchief again, other than on his jeans, but he is finding that idea grosser than swallowing it, strangely – before remembering himself.

Good Lord, 'confusing' does not begin to cover it. Hermann feels intensely paranoid, and absolutely careless, all at once.

It's disorientating, but somehow reassuring.

His knee aches terribly as well, but that is at least his own, familiar feeling. He bounces it a couple of times in the quiet, to shake the ache out of it. Newton, who had been staring out at the door as if willing it to open mid-flight, looks at him, then away. Then back again.

"Uh...sorry in advance about this," he says, and suddenly his hand is on Hermann's leg, just above the knee, fingers under the back of it, and he is digging his thumb into the muscle of Hermann's thigh.

The shock and *relief* makes his breath come out of him in a winded noise. Newton doesn't look up, just hunches his shoulders, presses the pad of his dirty thumb in and rocks his wrist in an almost 180 degree swing - three, four times, jabbing the muscle until it— unlocks. Something *clicks*, and Hermann has to bite down on another groan as his knee relaxes.

He sighs, a little choked, spine feeling as if it's *melting* as he stares down at his leg. Newton clears his throat, then turns away, looking out of the window.

He starts to bounce his own leg, to his usual, much faster tempo.

"Th-thank you," Hermann says, stunned, after a moment.

Newton shrugs gracefully, throwing a quick grin at him. His eyes are bright behind his cracked glasses; part-bloody, but gently amused, and fairly *knowing*. “No problem.”

Hermann’s pulse races, and the strange echoes of the Drift are heady and sharp. He definitely doesn't feel quite what he'd call *himself*.

It isn't so terrible thus far, though. If they can make it back in time, they might even salvage the day.

How unexpected.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

If you're reading, if you *have* been reading - I love you, I *love you*, your comments and your messages have meant the bloody world. THIS is the thing I've been planning for 5 months, the surprise I wanted to pull out, this is the thing I have *agonised* about. You'll see. I hope it was worth it, for you.

Just to clarify, also: NOT THE END! I have no plans to disappoint the rating I have given this. *Patience*.

And, yes, Newt does quote Ron Weasley here.

Shit happens.

Two Drifts.

Two Drifts down, but Newt's actually feeling pretty good.

So most of that is probably pure, chemical stimulation, body response, flight and fight and absolute, reverberating fear, but so *what*, it feels like *flying* – and the other bit, the other part which is still sending Newt skipping and sliding through his jangled synapses, and skidding, mentally, through the shape of his mind in a rush, is him still riding the euphoric and terrible wave-effect from the moment when Hermann had said, "I'll go with you."

I'll go with you.

Fuck.

As moments go, it's *momentous*. Got to be one of the most bright and beating Newt's ever had. One of those close-ups on a nature show, or a microscope re-adjusting to miniscule clarity. A sudden focussing in of everything in his head to one moment, one face, one *thing*.

Heonly rarely gets *all* of his attention focussed on a singular entity. This should be some sort of honour, for Hermann.

Shit, *Newt's* honoured.

He offered to *go with him*.

Newt hadn't leapt into it blindly, either – these things happen fast, end of the world, no time for *politeness*, but he'd had just about enough time after Hermann's offer to be briefly, deeply panicked that he might see *too* much, when Newt wasn't ready, at just the *wrong time* – but. A hero does what he has to, right, and it was too big to be scared of. Plus, if he can say *luckily*, the kaiju had burst through before he'd spilled anything too recent, anyway.

Everything after that seemed blurred in comparison, turning into a predictable mess as he twitched and reeled from splitting his mind between his lab partner and the hive mind. Again. On the

surface he's good, he's great, looking sharp; underneath, yeah okay he's kind of a gaping chasm of a tightly reined-in residual tremors, a reflex that feels like holding your breath just after a nuclear explosion, an ultimately pointless effort that's going to make no difference in the long run because eventually you have to *gulp*, so of *course* he's bewildered, abso-fuckin-lutely, they both are – but they keep it together.

Because they're *awesome*.

He is convinced, though, that when Hermann was sick it was actually for *both* of them. Newt had picked up on losses through their sharing, and not from his partner's perspective.

From the *kaiju*'s.

The wide shot *and* the close-up. Of the Wei Tangs, and the Kaidanovskys.

Fucking *hell*.

It...sucks. It's not surprising, it has an inevitability to it that is a little gross and sobering, they went out as they planned, but it's still shit, and it hurts to think about too much.

It's not until they're sitting too close in the helicopter that he and Hermann stop to catch their sort-of breath. Newt's chest is stuttery and tight, and he swallows the blood that comes from his nose again because it's familiar, chemically all his *own* - he hasn't had any replacements since he gashed his thigh running into a fence after basically failing to take up skateboarding when he was 14, so logically anything that *was* new back then has been totally assimilated into him now, has become *him*, in fact it *is* him, so the swallowing of his own actual genetic proof of identity and life is weirdly great.

This.

Does work, if you *think* about it.

About how the taste of his own DNA is suddenly, spectacularly *reassuring*.

Either way, Hermann's got the handkerchief again, and Newt doesn't *want* to wipe his hands on his jeans, for once. So swallowing it tastes *right*. It helps.

He can't explain it any better than that.

Hermann might not actually *need* him to, anymore, of course. He's not sure exactly how much of his personal preferences passed across, but Hermann doesn't protest as much as he might have previously, when Newt lets his own red elixir of fucking life dribble back from his nose and down his throat, *thus*. Point proven.

Kinda.

This is the same logic that lets him know that it's okay to help Hermann with his knee, when he starts bouncing it. Because Hermann *Drifted* with him. If he'd do that, it means Newt can do this.

He's known for a long time *what* to do, sure - he can make *music* with these hands - but Drifting has made him not care what *Hermann* would do. It felt as if it was him in pain, and he'd known it was worth doing because he'd done all those degrees to learn this kind of thing, at least *partly*, and he knew that he knew what he was doing, and he didn't want himself to be uncomfortable anymore.

Yeah, it was totally confused. Hinging on logic that was more *impulse*, missing a couple of steps, like they both do as they stumble out of the helicopter when they land, or at least a couple of words, but whatever. Newt hadn't *needed* them. It's never been proven what exact effects a neural handshake leaves, albeit real or imagined, and *none* had been given enough scientific picking over for his liking, though personally he suspects the results would be pan-specific to personal idiosyncrasies and secrets and flavours and kinks and this is a thing he'd have *loved* to have asked the Kaidanovskys if he hadn't been terrified that Sasha might castrate him. And now he can't. But. Now, right. *Now*, for *him* at least, it's shaping up alright so far.

To have this: that when he disregards the burning headache like a thumbtack pressing slowly, slowly in between his eyes and the nausea and the rattled feeling like he got shaken loose of his bones and then poured back into them in a cocktail of crushed, curving metal and ice – can we say Hadron Collider, *yes we can* – his conclusions are that he can touch Hermann, *fix* him, and know that Hermann isn't going to go anywhere.

Not now.

It's like... It's like relaxing, all at once. He doesn't have to *try* so hard. Like how the click of Hermann's knee must feel. He'd *worried*, man. About ever doing that, about driving him away. It's not the wider picture, it's not *everything*, but he's got part of it at least, and that's. *Beyond* cool. Great.

A total *understatement*.

Words really aren't cutting it, again. Words aren't *in* Hermann's head, *other* things are. And what a *glimpse* of them. Just a *glance* at the analytical but unexpectedly artistic, *tangible* experience of that mind has made Newt hungry. He hadn't really got to delve; the time had been shaped by the teeth of the kaiju behind it and how they were, you know, *biting down*, so it's as if they were juuuust about to collide - and then got chewed out and sent off to Precursor town, instead.

Probably for the best. That was the *aim*, after all. To see through the Breach. A better idea – AKA the confirmation of his deeply observed knowledge - of how Hermann thinks was beyond tempting but not actually the point. Only it's left them both a bit. Uh.

Dazed.

Newt's got tissue shoved up his nose from a packet that the pilot threw back at them, along with a bottle of water, just before they landed, after glancing at them in some consternation when they'd clambered in, and Hermann certainly looks pretty *uneven*.

In an unlikely show of forgetfulness, he actually leaves his coat in the helicopter.

Newt realises this when they're rocketing down in the elevator, but Hermann hasn't; his eyes on the floor numbers, hands crossed on top of his cane, tapping it agitatedly. Newt *could* leave it there... But he won't. Even turned inside out, as he might have been, Newt still knows himself well enough to know that if the world doesn't end, he'll be the one going back up there for it later, to shove it at Hermann like an offer. Like. He'll.

Yeah.

Personal failings aside, maybe come back to that later, he tells himself. Because it picks out his eyes, and you'll be cold without it.

That last bit makes sense, somehow.

Don't think about it.

Run.

They sprint through most of the 'dome when the doors open and up to LOCCENT. Newt finds he's moving as if his legs are longer than they actually *are*, his impulses are trying to shoot off down tibia-length that's not his own. His body reminds him, and though it is too *slow*, it also feels *wrong* to rush ahead - like a jerk behind his navel, *extremely* portkeyish, only right in his vertebrae, pulling him back.

They're *together*, right.

He drops back to grab Hermann and prop him up and *pull*.

They make it in time to interrupt military idiocy, because that's their thing, that's what they *do* - and just about get their point heard. Then they're shoved out of the way by Hansen, as is the other thing.

Newt makes a face, pulling the wad of tissue out of his nose, preparing to protest - but Tendo shouts.

"Sir! There's a third signature emerging from the Breach!"

"A triple event," he breathes, realising, like he knew it already.

Hermann is all shoulders and cheekbones; pale, pinched and anxious.

"Oh, *God*, I was right," he blasphemes under his breath, and he's not exactly smug about it. Newt is, distantly, wondering why he ever doubted, and remembering his first Drift, when he'd realised.

The second wave, coming.

When Tendo announces it's a Category V, he and Hermann just look at each other. Predicted, anticipated, known; it doesn't matter. It still rocks everyone in the room, right down to the toes.

Everything after that is *really* not done any justice by the data that jumps around the viewer screens. The Category V, from what he can tell, is all mass and limbs and caudae that move so fast that they fade like contrails. The geometry of the head alone dwarfs anything they've seen; she's *incredible*, and then the way the kaiju team up makes his mouth dry in an anticipatory, animal sort of way. He feels like a predator *and* prey.

It's vicious but *logical*, how they attack - yet the human reflex still works a step ahead. Mako and her bitch stab one, eviscerate another, Hansen the elder's a stiff-backed state, and Tendo's eyes are huge. He half-nods at Newt, though, at one point, after flicking his gaze up and down Hermann, all quick and concerned, before swivelling back to his console.

Newt likes Tendo. Did he mention that?

Did he *know* that?

They watch the two remaining kaiju converging on Striker Eureka - and that's when all of the shit hits all of the fans. There is a ghost-impression of claws slicing his belly open, when Pentecost and Chuck Hansen decide to give up themselves.

Oh, ouch. Newt *hears* the click of Hermann's swallow, next to him. They're standing right by the

guy's *dad*. It sucks, it really *sucks*; Pentecost is like the only useful wall there's actually *been* in the PPDC and, poor fucking Mako. Tendo's mouth is all soft, downturned sorrow, and Hermann looms behind him, and if Newt tilts a fraction nearer to him as the blast thuds out down their line, who's to know, *fuck*— but it works. It was worth it, he guesses.

Then it's just Mako and her guy, and all they can do is listen as they're taking his and Hermann's advice and riding down into the Breach. Her oxygen's fucked, none of *them* are breathing, listening, and they all jump across and lean over the console Tendo slides over to, trying to reroute air to her. Then Raleigh comes up with one of his standardly *blunt* plans, burns the kaiju with Gipsy's front burners, and then they're— through.

"They're in."

All of them gathered around the mic, ready to shout *something*, slump as one, as if slapped. Newt turns to catch Hermann's eye.

"It worked!" he cries, idiotically. It did. They helped do *that*.

The line goes strange, as Gipsy falls, with a background static to it that tells them a lot about distance and trans-dimensions in a visceral, eerie sort of way, but it's underpinned by Mako's gasps and that grounds it to here and chest-aching *now*. Her guy gives her his oxygen, and Tendo makes a little moany noise in the back of his throat.

He's known Raleigh a long time, Newt remembers. Shit, shit.

Tendo's telling the guy to get out of there even as Raleigh's sending Mako up, Hansen thumps a fist on the surface, moving to another viewer, and Newt has never willed an explosion this hard before. Normally he's the kind of scientist that tries to *avoid* those, and it finally strikes him, clicking into place, as he listens; what he's wondered and understands, now, since the kaiju have been *in his head* and he's seen the strings behind them.

He never wanted the annihilation of the kaiju, but the *Precursors*? Fuck and fuck *them*. Humans built the Jaeger, because *they* built the kaiju. The most amazing thing he's ever seen didn't happen organically, didn't evolve, aren't following natural instincts. They were *messed* with.

He's not opposed to genetic modification, no question there's a place for it, but this just feels fundamentally *wrong*. It's why they have no scars, no sign of age, no natural development. Steps were skipped, holes were stitched together. It's *crude*, messy. Maybe Hermann's faith is strengthened by all the fucking golden ratio and hexagons and whatever, in nature, well, Newt *gets* that, in a way, because this is just...ungodly. On the one hand, there's an epic predator evolving to be badass, *yes* - and then there's one being cobbled together and sent out to kill, and then to die. It's not *right*. There's no *longevity*.

Even their reproduction was engineered; not so much about growing a race but about having another to take the place of that which falls before. Not to procreate but to pulverise. The kaiju were engineered for destruction, *used*, not to fit into their environment but to smash it up for those that would follow. Would they even have a place on earth, if the humans *were* gone? Pff. And he knows that now in a way that makes his grit his teeth. They could be so much else but instead they've been modified and perfected for one purpose. Engineered. They've been *wasted*.

He wants that Breach closed, he wants them gone, he wants to remember then, study them, learn from them, he wants the world not to end, he wants *Hermann*, and he wants their fucking lives back.

Hit the button, hit the button and all's forgiven, dude, he thinks, at Raleigh - and Becket shouts down what he's doing, his voice reedy - and it *doesn't work*.

“What’s going on?!” Hansen bellows, before Tendo explains the problem.

Honestly, it’s like a *movie*, and not in the good way. They’re all staring at the screen and Newt’s leg is twitching.

“He’s out of time,” he says, not that he needs to, they all *know*, but he’s jittery with it, and Hermann’s staring, his eyes fixed and dark, blood still in left iris, at the screen. “He has to self-destruct *now*.”

The pilot keeps falling, though, through levels of information they’ve never seen. When the countdown finally starts Hansen runs back over to the screen with Tendo, but he and Hermann keep watching where they are, leaned in close, their upper arms touching, as the computer’s voice chants and—

The Breach collapses.

Just that easily. A mess of light and pixels.

Tendo shouts it to them all, his voice wavering at the end; they rush over to look at it at the same time, both of them sent by the same, tangled-up drive to check, to make *sure*. He slaps Tendo’s shoulder, half-grins at him, and gets the same bewildered look back – then they’re hitting buttons wildly, checking the data as it jumps up in front of him. It looks too *simple*. That can’t—that can’t be it, but it is, and it’s huge in a way he almost can’t swallow around. They just.

It’s *closed*.

He needs to keep his hands busy, right. If he looks at Hermann he might actually start speaking in *tongues*.

They wait for Mako to surface, and then for Becket. The sounds of her checking on her champion when he breaks through is like tracking a biorhythm with outdated instruments – the audio is clear enough that she sounds right *there*, but she’s *not*, and the symbols on screen don’t sum any of it up properly. Tendo can’t tell what he’s looking at, none of them can, it’s an *actual* rollercoaster; she’s survived, but Newt’s stomach sinks again when Raleigh comes up, and then there’s a peak in his entire experience of *misery* as she starts to beg. Oh, kid. He has to close his eyes for a second at her uneven noises coming through, his hands balled up in body-echo of the fist in his gut. Next to him, Hermann’s blinking hard, Tendo’s trying to guide her as they all stare at the unemotional green shapes on the viewscreen, and Newt might just want to *cry* a little bit. Not fair. *Not* cool. So they wait, they stare, she pleads— and Becket *isn’t* dead, he’s being cocky.

He is such a *dick*, oh my god, and it’s brilliant. It’s.

It’s *done*.

The room erupts into joyous cheers and Newt— oh, *shit*, he sags, physically *wilting*, and looks sideways at Hermann in the chorus of noise. All of his blood is gasping. Central nervous system, respiratory system, things that he owns, his body remindshim, *breathe*. They’ve just had a part in a collective *saving of the world*, he can’t really see out of his left eye, but Hermann looks about as good as he feels.

Nah, that’s not right. Herman looks *great*, twisting towards him.

Hermann's still there.

Hermann Drifted with him.

Fuck it, if there was ever a moment for a hug this *it*. Newt reaches for him, but Hermann's already leaning in, wrapping long arms around him. Their bodies fit together warm and easy. Newt can't remember the last time they hugged. They might *never* have hugged? Time isn't linear anymore; he feels about 6 years old, and Hermann seems more able to touch than he normally does, somehow younger too. He also smells as terrible as Newt does, stale with sweat, but the bump of his jaw against Newt's cheekbone is as resonant in his head as a cymbal strike.

Hermann claps Tendo on the shoulders when he moves away, shifting easily around, using people to lean against. Maybe that's a trace of Newt in him, helping propel his limbs. He'd be shocked enough at one embrace, new world or no - yet after Hansen orders the clock stopped, Hermann shuffles close to him *again*. That one's all him, alone; Newt was distracted by everything else, the new possibility, the people that get to carry on, his godson, his defunct specialism, his own, epic *life*—

He's grateful for the nudge against his shoulder, bringing him back. Hermann must *know* how bone-tired he is, but also how full of feeling, humming, *vibrating* with it. Surprised, grateful. They're *alive*, and others aren't.

He might be the luckiest dude in the world.

He grins, huge and soft and probably crooked, slinging an arm around Hermann's shoulder. *Casual touch* is still a marvel, but he feels like he's *earned* it. Is that weird?

Stupid with it, he knocks their heads together, following a canine sort of instinct. It hurts *a lot*, but he finds he can't stop *smiling*. He keeps his hand curled in a fist so he doesn't grip too much, though. And he does okay at that, too. Which is pretty impressive. Urge to cling, rising.

He hopes Hermann *also* doesn't know what to do next. Mako and Raleigh might be the ones adrift, but he's feeling pretty unsure himself, suddenly.

No more kaiju. No more threat. Clean up, retrospect. He's tipping from one thing to another, all of a sudden. Decision, hesitation.

What do they do *now*?

When – Hermann supposes that he *must* be a Marshall, now, surely - Hansen and his dog drift away from LOCCENT, everyone moves out of his way as one, in an unspoken parting of the ways that is sombre enough to witness, let alone be a *part* of.

Hermann's frontal lobe throbs.

A beat, and then people around them set into happy hysterics again. Shouts, calls, phones coming out of pockets, staff who shouldn't even be there jumping onto consoles or heading out to go and greet Miss Mori and Raleigh Becket when they return. Hermann would very much like to call his siblings, actually, but at the forefront of his mind, *literally*, is the buzzing blink of Newton.

Said *Drift* partner is rubbing the knuckles of one fist uncomfortably over the back of the other scuffed, filthy hand, looking around the room, momentarily alone. The chance of observation is enough for Hermann to see and *know* that Newton is truly exhausted, before he translates that movement fluidly into pleased reciprocation of another hug from Tendo, who is maintaining a

careful point of energy for everyone to focus on.

Tendo slaps Newton on the shoulder again, then sets upon announcing to everyone left that they go and find all of the alcohol that the base can possibly contain.

For Pentecost, for the pilots, for everyone.

“Go rest if you want, of course,” he says. “Everyone else, to the Mess. No arguments.”

The control room starts to empty, immediately. Newton, however, does not volunteer to help in the predictable search for booze and heads, instead, toward Tendo’s own vacated chair. There is that need to collapse that Hermann is also feeling - though Newton’s is surely *worse* than his own, given the other excursions he has enjoyed through that day. No, *previous* day. It’s morning, yes. No-one in the room has slept in 24 hours, he remembers. Particularly *them*, running all over the bone slums and Shatterdome.

Sitting. Suddenly it doesn’t seem a bad idea, at all.

“Hey!” Tendo calls to Newton. “You coming?”

Newton sinks into his chair with a tremulous little groan and lets his head fall back, legs splaying.

“*Two* minutes,” he calls back, eyes shutting even as he lifts two fingers. “There in a second.”

“Right.” Tendo sounds unconvinced. “And please, go ahead, abuse my chair.”

The fingers become a thumbs-up, and Tendo snorts. Then he looks over at Hermann, who is leaning back against the wall for support. He straightens a half-inch, but it is far too obvious, and late. Tendo’s smile turns gentle and he crosses over, as the last of the other people push past to file out.

“You okay, brother? You need to go get checked out?” he asks, quietly.

“We seem fine so far, thank you.”

We.

Scheiße.

The use of the plural exposes too much, he is sure, but he cannot take it back once he has unexpectedly said it. It felt correct. Tendo regards him a moment more, then glances back at Newton, who still has his eyes shut, his neck tipped back in a perfect catenary. Tendo’s eyebrow is pointedly up when he turns back - but he doesn’t press, thankfully using that engineer’s lightness of touch he can demonstrate, on occasion, with people as well as machines.

Hermann lifts his chin again, and shrugs in answer, lightly.

“...Okay.” Tendo grips his shoulder and squeezes a little, his expression tired, but pointed. “See you in a bit, then?”

“Yes.” The chair next to Hermann looks so good that he would like to *will* it closer, actually, but he is not going to give Tendo the satisfaction of trying, publicly.

Still, Tendo lingers. “You look like you’re gonna have a good story to tell, at least,” he suggests.

Hermann looks heavenward. “Yes, I’m sure at *some* point there will be a fairly monumental

debriefing for all of us. You can hear it then.”

“Alright, alright. Keep your secrets.” Tendo laughs at him, and leaves.

Hermann stays with Newton. Of course.

This is at least in part because he’s not convinced that his legs will hold him up any longer, mind.

It is *relief*; it is overwhelming and long overdue shock; it is the reverberation of two thought-processes and one *presence* in his mind. The kaiju are gone, blocked off now, but they were still *there* in the Drift he had shared between them and Newton, and so they still resonate as his mind tries to recalibrate and heal, the violence of them flashing up on occasion, like the sudden bounce of light on scales in deep water as something turns over.

...Goodness. There are some fairly *choice* phrases flitting through his thoughts.

He worries, briefly, that he might have a slightly poetic slant for a while. Of all the side-effects he might receive - and these are things about which he had been sceptical, though fascinated - how *nauseating* that he seems to have received none of the intelligence or frustrating insight from Newton but, instead, the inane need for *metaphor* he has noted many times. A hyperbolic shadow, left in his mind.

He hooks the chair with his cane and sinks into it, at last, already massaging the bridge of his nose, and contents himself watching Newton - who opens his eyes and jerks upwards. Spotting that he is now seated, he wheels his own chair over, achieving this by propelling it sideways with a push off one console with a foot. He’s done that more than once, in the last decade, and it is still ridiculous.

It bumps to a stop, hitting the wall next to Hermann, and thus he thinks how apt an analogy that had been. Newton as the eternal *child*, chasing his shadow and his utterly conflicting instincts. Defiant pride in himself, and a secret fear of what others would want to change about him.

Yes, he’s learned more than one thing about Newton, that day. Really, their Drift had been a *mess*, but there had been some realisation of his suspicions, alongside the new, muddled information. And that lovely, overruling terror.

“Hi,” Newton says, in response to Hermann’s pointed look, then slumps even lower into his seat. “Man. Even my *shins* ache.”

“Mmn.” Hermann rubs the bridge of his nose again, using it as an excuse to close his eyes.

Newton shuffles some more, then gives a long, laborious exhale. “I still can’t believe you Drifted with me,” he says, as if he knows Hermann’s thoughts.

Hermann can, and also cannot, either.

He should really have seen it coming, at the very least. It is not exactly a *surprise*.

“How do you feel?” he asks in response, to deflect.

Newton looks sideways at the question, his mouth ajar, openly *thinking*. Looking. His observational tendencies, again; Hermann feels that new kind of need to catalogue, as well. To *study*. Is that his friend, or the kaiju? He possibly does not want to know, yet.

Hoping it will go away is an immature response, but not an unfamiliar one.

Wait, *is* he *regressing*, now? Brilliant. Just *brilliant*.

Newton, after considering his response for longer than normal, simply tips his head back against the wall again and shrugs, his awful jacket squeaking against the leather.

“Pretty good. Weird.”

“You do realise that you need an MRI, or three?”

“*Dude*, no. I’m good. There’s gonna be a party, ‘or three’, to finish first. Science *later*. You know I’m going to want to pick over everything myself, anyway, I don’t need anyone else.”

“You *must*—”

“*You* must realise we all just saved the world, right?” Newton slants an eyebrow at him. “*This* is the time to stop thinking and just in—indulge.” He stumbles on the last word, glancing away. Odd.

Hermann frowns at him. “There won’t be *any* indulging if your brain starts swelling up.”

Chuckling, Newton fiddles with the rip in his jeans, now. “Do you even know how that *works*? Anyway. Alcohol thins blood.”

He is being *baited* with idiocy, and he knows it, but he doesn’t care. The dismay he feels is still perfectly apt.

“You *cannot* be considering alcohol.”

“Oh, like you wouldn’t kill for a drink of *something*.”

That smirk is far too knowing. Hermann sniffs in response, which makes his eye sockets throb. “Yes. *Tea*.”

“Pff. Besides *which*,” Newton continues, talking over his protest, “if I have a scan, *you*’re getting one too, you know.”

How desperately unappealing. “I’m sure I will not require any such thing.”

Newton stills. “Yeeeeeah explain your logic to me, here, you seem to be *lacking* it.”

He copies Newton’s gesture from earlier, lifting two fingers, and even resists the urge to turn them around. “*Numbers*, Newton. Two Drifts, versus one. I am far less affected than you.”

“Right.” Newton sits up straight, all so that he can stare pointedly at Hermann. “So how *do* you feel?”

“I...”

He *tries* to think how to catalogue it. The sum of an experience completely unlike anything that he can or could describe. There is no need to, with Newton, who was *there*, yet still he wants to ask about tendon-tightening fear, slowly relaxing its grip, and if it is shared. The sting of sorrow, and the knowledge that none that have gone would want him to wallow, and the elation, too - and the blood in his eye, the faint, *faint* taste of sorbet on his tongue, the four *hundred* drinks he requires, actually. The strange sensory-warmth of a palm on his lower back - but that had never happened, if his actual memory is correct, no matter how much it nags insistently that it was there. Strange. So instead he thinks again of the MRI that Newton needs but doesn’t want, the one he would like to avoid, himself. And the kaiju.

Of course.

Anechoic truth of them lingering; a scent, a *movement*, like distant waves or the ripples of something emerging from water, seen from extremely far away. As if he and Newton are now the only two in the ocean, paddling, hitting the point of exhaustion before they sink, and the water level is—

Right. He seems to have some strange fascination with *sea*, now.

He cannot be sure if *that* is Newton's literary influence or the kaiju, either.

All of this flits through his mind quickly, terribly, but then is gone, because he wills it to be. The Breach is closed, Newton is mostly undamaged. They are safe. Hermann feels chilly, and shaky, but none of that was cause for any great alarm, he could easily rectify that with his—

"I left my *coat* in the helicopter," he realises.

Newton blinks. "I'm guessing that's *not* a euphemism?"

"*No*. I have just realised. Damn." He twists toward the door. "Do you think it will still be in there...?"

Newton chuckles again, somewhat wheezingly now, and pats him on the arm. "Hermann? You *need* to sort out your priorities."

"Oh, shut up."

He is smiling at Newton, though.

Silence, for a moment. They remain sitting, steady, half-watching the information dancing about on the screens far opposite that have been abandoned.

They could get up.

They really *should*.

Newton tilts his head and his neck crunches, satisfyingly. Hermann taps a foot on the floor, begins idly rolling his cane horizontally across his thighs, back and forward, with the tiniest movements. Pleasing swells of movement, back and forward. On a console, something beeps, something else whirs.

"Stop fidgeting."

Hermann starts, and then stares at Newton. "Excuse me?"

Newton is grinning, and rubs a hand along his jaw in said smug amusement. His face is pale with exhaustion, but his eyes are bright, his freckles stark against the dirt and grit. "*You*. Can't sit still." He points. His finger wavers, but then finds its mark. "You're being *me*."

He attempts a glare. "Near-death experience. These things temporarily change a man."

"*Ha*," Newton squawks. They are playing lightly with a subject that is hovering over the entire base, yes, but it helps. "We were never gonna *die*. Not Drifting, anyway."

"You're convinced of that, are you?"

“Pretty much.”

Hermann snorts. “Oh what clarity of vision. *Such* a shame that your eyes don’t match up to it. You really are lost without your glasses, aren’t you?” The glimpses of Newt’s perspective even in childhood had shown him as much.

“Hey, you’re a lot *blurrier* when it comes to text than you let on,” Newton counters. “Suck it up and up your prescription, maybe?”

Hermann musters that glare. “I *knew* that Drifting with you was a bad idea.”

“Nah, you didn’t.” Newton’s grin is soft and smudgy. Hermann has let his heart show too much and Newton is absolutely going to use it against him for the foreseeable future.

What he is *not* sure of, though, is what exactly that future *is*. What to do with this much relief and the realisation of the need to be as close as physically possible to the man, *moreso* than before. Still without actually touching him, but wanting to as much as ever, and perhaps being ready to. If that really matters, anymore - and just how brave he really is, and just how blind, and what he is willing to lose.

“I am going to shower off this filth before it settles in,” he answers, because it seems like something he ought to do.

He makes to get up, putting his hands on the arm-rests to help support his tired body. His phone will be ringing soon, his family, his responsibilities, looking for confirmation and reassurance and shared wonder, and he hasn’t got the energy, right then. He wants to stay with Newton. Just for a moment. *And* he needs to wash. To think. Recalibrate. *Prepare*.

“...Go on then.”

“I *am*.”

He isn’t.

His body won’t cooperate. It is practically whining, *Let me catch my breath?* He eases back down into the seat again.

“...Two minutes?” Newton suggests, lifting the two fingers again with a grin. Hermann flexes his knees, cracks his fingers, and thinks of water. Hot water. Come *on*.

“...One minute,” he acquiesces.

“Right with you.” Newton chuckles, slumps in his chair, and closes his eyes again. “Work up to it, man.”

“You should never have sat down, you idiot.”

“Nope.”

Rubbing his gritty face, Hermann folds his arms in defence, letting his chin fall onto his chest and his eyelids droop. Newton nudges him with a knee, after a second.

“Yes? Do you need a reminder that you are a terrible influence with appalling ideas?” he murmurs, and Newton laughs, happily. The pleasure crackles between them. It always did, didn’t it?

Hermann does not know how he *feels*. Or, in truth, he does. He just does not know how to proceed.

“Yup,” Newton agrees.

They count to 60 together, silently. Then 120.

Finally, Newton swears and gets up, and pulls him to his feet.

His room looks different.

Still a muddle, yeah, a nice physical rendering of his interior self – and probably a great parallel of his *brain*, right now – but it’s not just him, it definitely looks *smaller*.

To be fair, he did just help save the world, and let his favourite person into his head, along with his scientifically-speaking-favourite beings, so that’ll give a guy a new perspective, but it’s still weird.

Beings he helped irradiate, right.

That’s going to take some getting used to.

They’d passed through the Mess where the welcome party was waiting for Mako and Raleigh, getting back slaps and cheers from a few, but the majority didn’t notice them and they’d slipped through the edges unseen. *Normally* Newt would be righteously indignant about being overlooked – or he’d be there leading the charge - but a shower now seemed vitally important to him in ways it *never had*. This had got to be Hermann. Modifying him. Like a *virus*.

He wasn’t fighting it, for the moment. He was absolutely going to rock back up later and chew them all out, but for now, he was sticking with Hermann. He was getting to *touch* Hermann.

He’d caught Hermann’s elbow in the corridor outside their lab, when he’d limped a bit more than normal, even with his cane, before Hermann could ask for help. Then realised that he wasn’t actually *going* to, out loud at least, and so ignored the look he got. Played it smooth. It was *obvious* all of the running had obviously not helped Hermann’s leg, and he *did* lean against Newt when they were approaching the doors, in the end, so it all balanced.

At least he hadn’t been running for his life *quite* so literally as Newt, though. Bruises were just starting to make themselves known all over him, now that he mentioned it; murmuring along the backs of his shoulders, hissing on the scuffed grazes on his knee and head. He knew, *biologically*, that he should just keep going, going, before all of the adrenaline went and he crashed out, but hot water sounded too good to pass up. A break to think, a break to decide; when and how do you approach *feelings* after life-changing events, right. What’s the *etiquette* here? What did he want to do before?

He can’t remember.

He’d done a good job at totally avoiding a look at the no-longer moving brain in the tank, as they passed through the lab. Nothing to keep it going anymore, no reaching back across a constantly open connection. Preserved as it was, it had been like a conduit, a hard-drive of images, looping. Now it had slid to the bottom in a lump that felt, *felt*, like a blank space, in the periphery of Newt’s vision. A hole. With that and the slice of vertebrae over on the side, slowly darkening under the cupboards, and the silent lab, everything just smacked of absence. Void. *Breach*.

Not what he wanted to deal with right then. Possibility, *that* was the thing. So instead he’d watched Hermann limping into his room.

The moment the door closed, his smile had dropped, and he'd shivered, head to toe. It was just a door. Just a couple of walls. *But*. Not being able to see Hermann felt...wrong. He'd given an awkward half-wave before shutting the door, after the tiniest hesitation that Newt had nonetheless latched onto hopefully. Hermann didn't want to separate *either*, right?

Alternatively, he was just projecting on a friend who had done more than he needed, because he likes to read too much into things, particularly when buoyed by averting the apocalypse and learning more than he'd ever dreamed possible about the kaiju, himself, and the object of his affections.

Newt stops loitering and slaps himself on both cheeks, lightly, as he enters his room.

The water that comes out of the shower is startlingly scorching, filling the tiny 'bathroom' (he tends to think *wet corner*) with steam in a few seconds. Unusual, but *appreciated*.

He peels every bit of clothing off with a grimace, kicks his boots into the wall and drops his cracked glasses in the sink, and steps into the cubicle.

Immediately he drenches to pink-skinned, throbbing heaven, every ache flaring and then dying down. The grit and sweat runs down off his ankles and he can't help but shudder in pleasure. Without his glasses, his tattoos are just blurs of colour on his chest and arms; he has to bring them close to see any detail, and *they* look different, too. They're more than motivation now. They're testament, they're memorial.

It's a *lot* to think about.

He leans both hands on the tiles, either side of the faucet, and lets his head bow, closing his eyes. Just a moment, to *stop*. The streaming foam rushes past his ears, and he's so *tired*, everything hitting him again. His breath comes rhythmically. His heartbeat. The sound of the water is familiar...

waves rush—

the current pulls—

sinews stretch and snap—

he's watching the footage of the kaiju passing through the bridge and his body falters—

fight all flesh we kill—

the ground rumbles—

*Vanessa spots him across the room and jumps up so quick the make-up artist smudges lipstick
along her cheek; as if he'd forget—*

screaming, SCREAMING—

Hanna giggles at him, her hair newly bright dyed-red—

the water's cold over the top of his boots as he splashes through the river, following Gunter —

teeth, claws—

Patrick bites his bottom lip and his stomach flips right over, like the terrible pancakes Dietrich

made him have for breakfast that morning—

matter organs guts we add voices to roar crush flatten make room for us—

his parents are talking about him in the living room with the school psychiatrist - he can hear from the stairs, they're not even trying to hide it, so he slams the door on his way out—

up and up and ever up through the water —

*he will find the answer if it takes him all **night**—*

*kylie **can't** like him, she can't possibly **like** him, life's not that cool normally—*

the gap the gap the hole—

electric flash cracks open bone stretch you your blood—

*the snow is cold below and his lungs spark as he's gasping but his hip, his knee is fire, twisted **fire***
—

Newt's leg flares and buckles under him and he comes to, crumpled on the floor of the shower, face near the drain. He blinks, pants, and sits back clumsily, shoulders thunking against the glass.

The water is running lukewarm at best, and his nose is bleeding again. The red bubbles burble and swirl around the plughole like something out of Psycho. Yeah, he's seen how *that* film goes—

He wipes his nose clean on his wrist. Gooseflesh have sprung up all over his body in the spluttery cold and the sound of the thud keeps going, bouncing around the room in the haze - until he realises, turning his head blearily, that it's someone banging on his door.

Hermann.

He heaves himself up, out and into a towel, wrapping it roughly about his waist and fishing his glasses out of the sink. They're steamed up, but not too badly, and at least things stop shuddering and find an equilibrium where he can *see*. He bunches the towel up around his waist and stumbles out into his room. Hermann's out there, and in his *head*, younger even than when they'd met, and as he was three years ago, and as he is now, and shit, that was confusing. Newt feels like he's been thrown around his shower by the experience. The...flashes. Like Drifting, without the PONS.

The fuck?

Bang, bang, bang.

He manages to stub a toe on a chair-leg on the way to the door, half-tripping, so when he tugs the door open partway through another round of slaps on its surface, he's hopping.

"*Shit*," he's hissing, but already looking up in hope - and it *is* Hermann, like he'd known, flat palm still raised. His hair is wet too but he's in clean pants and a hastily buttoned shirt. He missed two entirely- there's a sliver of the white vest underneath at his vulnerable belly. His. Uh. His belly. Just that.

His feet are bare, his skin almost white, and he's babbling.

"*Newton*, are you— Did you just—" he begins, winded, but Newt is already answering, "*Yeah*."

He reaches out to grab hold of Hermann's forearm, to regain his own balance, and to steady Hermann, too, who doesn't have his cane. He suspects that Hermann's shaking, as well. It was a guess, really, but he grips tight, just to check. All he can really tell is that Hermann's skin is hot, and still damp.

It makes him feel better, though.

Hermann pauses, and tips a glance down at his wet chest and back up, taking in the water-splattered kaiju all over his skin and probably recoiling inside, after what just happened - fuck knows Newt will possibly need to take a steeling breath of his own now, to remind himself they're *his* - though Hermann's expression remains the same; careful, a little shuttered. He looks instead to a spot on the door just to the right of Newt's arm.

Newt's head throbs, recedes, throbs again. *Like a wave*. He wonders if Hermann's feeling the same, and lets go of his arm.

"Um. Are you okay?" he asks for the second time in a few hours, hefting his towel tighter.

"Of course." Hermann's reply is instant. His eyes flick back to catch Newt's. "Are you? Apart from. The obvious." He shakes his head, as if clearing it. His speech pattern is all *wrong*. Newt narrows his eyes, but stops before Hermann continues. "Newton, what did you—"

"See? *Way* too much, man."

"Yes." Hermann gives him a knowing sort of grimace, then wipes away some of the hair plastered to his own forehead. Newt can see that he *is* shivering. He knew it. What did *Hermann* see? The same? Did he— in the *shower*, too? - he's got a rail, Newt thinks, surely, but— Okay, no, maybe *don't* think about your lab partner naked right now, it's all too vulnerable and gut-wrenching to be *attractive*.

"It's. It's as if they're still wired up with us," Hermann says, in a rush. "This isn't residual link, nor corresponding metabolic effect - the tone of kaiju was the same, a...a sensory echo, as it were, and nothing more - but the rest? They were personal things I hadn't picked out in the Drift." He is gesturing around in front of Newt's face in arcs and swoops like murmurations, that Newt has to follow. "They were *new*."

He steps backwards to lean an arm against the door, carefully. "Yeah. *Yeah*, for me too. As if *they're* still connected to us, only stuck on repeat—"

"—but we're still sending things through. Ah. Each *other*."

Awkward.

Is this awkward?

This is definitely awkward.

Hermann puts his hands in his pockets, suddenly. A drip falls from Newt's hair, dribbles down his neck, and follows his spine all the way until it hits cotton. He *doesn't* shiver, though. Man pride.

"Of course, that isn't *possible*, is it?" Hermann says, quietly, when Newt, for once, can't think how to answer.

He grimaces. "Riiiiight, I really need to be clothed for this." He knows this with *certainty*.

Hermann twitches, as if he'd forgotten, and— oh, *no*, colours, gorgeously, up across his cheeks and way too lush for right about then. On the bright side, he'd been too pale, so that's good. On the downer, *boner*.

Newton backs up some more.

“Yes,” Hermann says, clearing his throat. “Get—dressed, and meet me in the lab. We need to sort this mess out.” He nods, perfunctorily, turns on his bare feet and starts to limp in determined direction of the lab.

He turns back after 3 steps.

“Shoes?” Newt suggests, as he passes again, and finds he can grin, the memory of the mindfuck they both just went through fading already. Especially whilst the now is so *very* entertaining.

Hermann scowls at him, so he ducks indoors and kicks his door shut in a hurry.

His heart is still hammering, though, and now his room is *freezing*. He throws back on some jeans, his boots, a rumpled but clean shirt, forgoes the tie – *please* – and heads back to work. To *work*. Fuck, all he wanted was a party. Didn't he deserve that? And some aspirin? And maybe to do something *else* that was stupid and amazing, in this apparently enchanted 48 hour window in which he comes out of scenarios that really *shouldn't* go well for him almost better than before?

This is what he gets for taking a leap, right. Not getting to take the other one? What's *that* about?

When Newton emerges, he looks like himself again. Not that he *didn't*, stripped to a towel and tattoos and bereft of bravado, it's just that the clothing Hermann used to mock has become comforting in ways that he does not want to examine. Potentially he will not need to, anymore. Now that it matters *less* than other things.

No one *is* perfect. He has been a child, in many ways. Choices have been made, whether consciously or not; his mind is strangely set *and* unsettled, and even if he is fairly late to the actual realisation, he is not overwhelmed by it. He wants Newton; he *could* try, again, and might even have him, perhaps. They are close, they...*work*. At the very least it's more crucial that he *try*. If they can get through this new hiccup. It is more worth trying than never doing so again. He must take a leap; he must stop *faffing*.

He sees that now, and it brings a strange sort of peace with it.

This is useful, because his pulse is racing.

Newton is not the only reason. The unexpected barrage of images whilst drying himself off, seated in his shower with the water still running as he had been too lazy to reach and turn it off until he was mostly dry – it was recycled through everyone else in the Shatterdome *anyway*, that is for *certain* - had left him battered about. Coming back to himself pressed back against the wall, arched, exposed, disorientated, the showerhead knocked aside by what must have been his own flail and so spattering out through the open cubicle door onto the floor. It had soaked his shoes, where he'd stepped out of them; they might have been ruined anyway but that was *still* insult to injury.

And then, as he pulled himself to standing, was the knowledge, in his *bones*, that Newton would be experiencing the same next door.

He'd slapped, flat footed, right through the puddle, skidding as he started to yank on still-damp clothes, and had to grab the sink. And then to run. *Again*.

Even now Newton's *presence* lingers undeniably through his recent memory, the images of him wet and bare and dazed and young and vulnerable and lost and running from kaiju and bleeding and drinking and *laughing* all mixing up into a confusing, distracting flash that plays over and over in his mind's eye.

Sounds of the *ruckus* just beginning in the Mess Hall are filtering through as far as their floor, but otherwise the lab is silent. The PONS machine they'd stuffed into the helicopter and brought back has been unceremoniously dumped inside, barely through the doors, by whatever soldier had been ordered to keep track of it, before he or she had run to LOCCENT or the Mess like everybody else.

It nags at Hermann's thoughts, as does the murky water in the kaiju tank.

He has shoes and his cane, now, at least, and found his glasses right where he discarded them in a hurry when the first kaiju emerged, not long after Newton had left. He's put them on, sent a message to his siblings, and then turned *off* the line in lieu of more important work to do. They will deal with this problem, get Newton fixed, get up to humanity and celebration and *life*, and then just... Do what he wants to. Time to indulge, indeed.

To let Newton touch him some more, if he will. To encourage it.

It is unfamiliar, to be so passive about it. He does not want to *plan*, anymore. To fight.

"Worked out the answer, yet?" Newton calls to him.

He turns, peering over the top of his glasses. "I realise that, having been proved right tonight, you quite rightly have a better respect for my cognitive abilities - however even *you* cannot expect me to have solved this in 3.3 minutes."

Newton stops, and grins, tilting his head. "You're being excessively accurate with percentages, buddy. That does *not* bode well for me. Are you freaking?"

Hermann straightens his spine, making it parallel to his cane. "I am *many* things, Newton Gesizler, but I am most certainly not *that*."

"Many things', he says this to *me*," Newton mutters, crossing over to him.

Hermann turns away, back to the desk, letting it go, because Newton hasn't laced his right boot and his hair is a frenzy. And Hermann quite possibly loves him too much to point it all out. To *need* to.

Friendship, dependence, respect, longing; he needs to stop drawing *lines* between them, and connect them, instead.

It's wonderful. Oh, *awful*.

He sighs, as his heart leaps and urges. "Let us start from the beginning?" he suggests.

Newton hops up onto the desk next to him – *his* desk – and starts kicking his heels. "So we can party quicker? I am *with* you. So!" he says, before Hermann can interrupt, or shove him off, "we know – and I really mean that we *know*," he emphasises, pointing to his temple, "that the kaiju were built for a purpose, *but*. They and the Precursors, creepy and hardy as they were, are dead. *So* dead. I, for one, don't... don't *feel* them. You know? Right? Case in *point*?"

He flicks a finger over his shoulder, to the tank that Hermann has *not* missed that he has positioned exactly behind himself, to where the brain lays, immobile, at the bottom.

He wants to agree. However. “A second Drift experience *after* closing the Breach, without a PONS, would seem to show the opposite,” he has to suggest, leaning a hip against the back of his chair.

Newton screws up his face. “I don’t buy it. Like we said, that was just flashback. Like PTSD. You know. *Daymares*. Nothing *new*, not like the bit with us. Such as. Uh...” He bites his bottom lip, grinning, glancing down at his feet. “*Patrick?*”

The back of Hermann’s neck goes hot. Again. Newton is on dangerous ground; Hermann had seen a *lot* of his own in the few seconds that they’d shared that he could use against him, should he wish. Can Newton know that he won’t? Doesn’t he *care*?

“Was it too *much* to ask that the near-apocalypse might mature you?”

“Was it too much to ask that it’d chill you *out*?” Newton grins, beautifully.

Hermann takes his glasses off just so that he can *throw* them at him – but Newton catches them frustratingly *fluidly* and examines them, then breathes on one of the lenses, buffs them clean on his bicep – his shirt is *passable*, Hermann supposes – and folds them up carefully on the desk.

Hermann glares. He has a vest on, but wishes that he’d got a jacket, too; his skin prickles, and not from temperature or exhaustion. “Yes. Well.” He pulls the chair out and sits down, for something to do with himself. “*Clearly* the link between us is still...live.”

Newton drums on his knees, in thought, then nods.

“There are traces in Pilots, of each other, after Drifts. We know that, even if it hasn’t been *proven*.”

“I doubt it is worth comparing our experience to those. Ours was hardly a *normal* Drift. The usual neural handshake is two people and a machine that does not *talk back*. There are no thoughts or urges or...drives, in the PONS or a Jaeger.”

“Unlike the programmed hive mind.”

“Precisely.”

They consider that. Hermann crosses his legs, uncomfortable. “Perhaps I ought to take this opportunity to remind you, again, of your general idiocy and lack of foresight in connecting to an alien organism?”

Newton swears at him. “Thank you, *saved the world* – and I’m more interested in *why* it happened again? If we approach it logically—”

“One of us always *does*—”

“— what triggered *that*?” He points toward the corridor where their rooms lie, and the showers.

The answer to that is easy.

“The water.”

It’s not been difficult to work out. The one thing between the kaiju and them, both barrier and protection. A *connection*. The foam, the current, the surging urge to reach the surface, the goal and

need deeply written into humanity *and* the kaiju, in their very DNA; to reach out, to push back, to destroy, to fight. Something they shared, however and whoever had programmed it in.

“The *water*,” Newton agrees. “Yeah. I guess we...relaxed, in there. Not like in LOCCENT, *more* than that. Really just *stopped*. And that triggered it.”

“Stimuli and reaction,” he hypothesises, and receives a considering hum.

Newton fidgets for a moment, then, bouncing his knee again as he thinks, and prodding the graze on his forehead until Hermann bats his hand away.

“They’re. They’re *not* still broadcasting, right?” he wonders, suddenly, looking up.

Hermann scoffs. “There is nothing *alive* to get through.”

“*We* are, though. Still living tissue, here.”

“As was the brain we connected to, and this one here.” He gestures towards it, and Newton follows the movement, instinctively – but flinches halfway and turns back, his eyes widening.

“No— wait, no, wait a second...” He has an *idea*. Hermann can see it, in his gaze, ranging, the way his hands still and then shove at his glasses, the way he leans forwards. He’s seen it so many times, and still it’s a wonder, to watch Newton *work*. “You’re wrong,” he breathes. “The brain I Drifted with here in the lab, remember what I said: it was only a fragment, and it was damaged.”

Hermann raises his eyebrows. “It was *moving*.”

“It was *preserved*, stuck in the state it had been. Like. Like a fish - no ability to retain anything new, only to store, repeating the same actions with minimal response. A damaged macro! Scrolling through the programming over and over.” Newton touches his mouth, in thought, then frowns at his fingers and folds his arms quickly, instead. “I. I saw snapshots, past memories, chemically kept history, but like you saw, it wasn’t enough to explain everything up-to-date for Pentecost...”

They leave a silence, for a second. It’s Newton’s way of showing respect. Hermann can see that.

“But, us, we were different, and that was the point. *We* Drifted with something *fresh*. Still connected.”

Hermann sits up, catching hold of the thread of logic with a jolt. Oh. *Yes*. Of *course*.

“*Five minutes to brain death*,” he repeats, remembering, and Newton nods fervently.

“I worked out the timing based on a mass/detrimental decline equation, and we fit into that window. That’s why it worked, because we were connected to them *in real time*. The...” He waggles a hand, looking for the word. “The *signal* was live. The transmission.”

Hermann nods as well, thinking. “By the time we emerged, that window had closed, though. It took more than two minutes to discuss and set the PONS up for double, and then it was over the same length *in* the Drift, surely. It... It *expired*.” He stills, in his surprise. “That’s why the Drift finished.”

“I...what? No, I came out of it *before* with a brain that was in stasis.”

“Ah,” Hermann snaps, “what you mean is that you *passed* out, after connecting to something that was preserved in an infinite loop of the same state that *your* brain could obviously not *handle* –

and that is *not an insult*, Newton, you *imbecile*, it is an observation. It was a...a door too big, for want of a better phrase. I doubt *anyone* could. You didn't 'emerge' from it, you *lapsed into unconsciousness*, and I— I found you."

His thoughts are racing, rushing. Newton, on the other hand, gawps at him for a moment, then sits up, pushing his cracked frames back up his nose again.

"*Shit*," he says, "whereas *we*—"

"Lost the connection because the brain we hooked up to *died*, fully, and organically. With us still *connected to it*."

Newton considers this. He looks down, then up; left, then right; then *winces*, and exhales, slowly.

"You, uh. Might make a valid point, there."

"I *don't* suppose you factored that in, at all, before you built this *bloody* machine?" he asks, redundantly.

Scowling, Newton rubs the back of his neck, jumping down to start pacing. "Hey, I didn't— Lay off, man, obviously I *didn't*, I wouldn't, you know— I wouldn't have knowingly put you in *danger*."

"Oh, no, only *yourself*."

Newton throws a pained look at him, and strides off. Hermann sighs, again, getting up as well, and crosses to stand next to him where he's stopped in front of the blackboards, head tipped back to go over them as if it reassures him. As if he can't look at Hermann, for a moment.

It is horrible, to see him *unsure*. He lets their shoulders brush, and Newton glances at him. His skin is very warm, through his shirt, and his eye remains bloodshot. Hermann supposes his own must be the same.

"Well, now that we understand what happened," he says, staring at the same equation that had told him there would be a triple event, "how can we *solve it*?"

Newton clears his throat, and begins rocking back on his heels. "I think... I think it's something like you said. Think of a switch, stuck on *open* - the thing that completed our circuit blinked out, so there's nothing to close it again, and no way of turning it off. We'll just keep bouncing between the memories of the kaiju, and each other, in close proximity."

"We're— My God, we're *out of alignment*," Hermann says, thinking of the phrase he's heard for the past decade.

"Like Pilots," Newton agrees, using the momentum of his rock forward to lean in and rub off an errant chalk line.

Hermann had been somewhat hasty in his final equations, yes.

Feeling territorial, he pushes the board Newton is frowning at aside, so as to capture his attention again and snap him out of whatever number he is chasing. The board behind is a little less complex. He leans an elbow against the ledge, making himself comfortable and taking the weight off his leg for a moment, and eyes his colleague, who is chuckling at him.

"You do have a *plan*, I presume. You made that face that normally means you have another terrible

idea.”

“We *might* need to Drift again.”

He starts so badly that his elbow slips off. He saves himself, as he has his cane to lean on, but Newton still darts in to catch his arm as if he hasn’t, and he is still *laughing*.

“...You are *joking*.”

“Nokaiju this time, I’m not that much of a glutton for punishment,” Newton grins, stepping back when he’s sure Hermann is satisfactorily propped up, and then shrugs at his aghast look. “I can rejig the PONS. We just need a few seconds. In, out, close the connection.”

“And what on earth or *sea* will the third component be? *There are no Jaeger left* to connect to!”

“Nothing. *Anything*! We just need...I don’t know, ambient noise, music, it doesn’t exactly matter.” Newton spread his arms wide. “The important thing is it doesn’t *interfere*. We get in, we get out, and boom - you’re out of my head, I’m out of yours, and all of those super enjoyable kaiju memories get cleaned out too.” He smirks, suddenly, and pats Hermann on the arm, rather patronisingly. “Think of it as reformatting. We need a disk cleanup!”

Hermann scowls.

“This whole day,” he grumps, “has been, without a doubt, the most endlessly *trying* of my life.”

“But you’re feeling kinda *awesome*, right?” Newton grins.

Hermann can’t come up with anything to respond to that smile with. He also can’t think of a better idea.

This probably means it will work.

“Come on, Hermann,” Newton adds, obviously trying to lighten the mood that fizzles, now, with anticipatory wariness, and not just from him. “Show me your *braaaaaain*.” It’s clumsy, crass, but he supposes it works. Only Newton could make something so potentially damaging sound so simplistic.

He grimaces, but steels himself.

“Well, I can’t think of another solution,” he laments, and sighs. “When?”

Newton spins, once, pointedly, taking in the PONS, the tank, the distant noise, and then back to Hermann again. “No time like the present?”

“Excuse me, was there not a *party* you wanted to get to?”

Newton gives him what can only be termed as a typically American ‘*duh*’ look. “Hell yes, and so I don’t know about you but *I’d* prefer to get this sorted before it gets triggered again? By, crap, who knows - the probably *overflowing* beer and champagne? The next times it *rains*, in Hong Kong, which oh, let’s guess, will be *today*?” His voice gets progressively higher and scratchier as he goes, too, and this is never a good sign. Hermann waves a hand irritably.

“All right, all right. *Fine*. Why not make it three times, I suppose it is a prime number,” he mutters, then pauses. “In, and then *out*,” he insists.

“The magic *deux* minutes,” Newton promises, and bounces off to attack his PONS machine.

Despite how simple Newt pointed out it could be, Hermann *still* draws out the argument over what to have in the background.

Music seems a safe bet, they agree, but then the prospect of genre gets between them. Rock? *No*. Electronic? Are you *messing* with me? Soul – oh *please*, not today. Jazz? Okay, but it might send them to sleep, and experimental would be too unpredictable.

They agree on Classical, finally, so there's a good start. Until Newt points out they're only going to do this *once*, so it's got to be epic, and obviously only *In The Hall of the Mountain King* can possibly do.

Hermann purses his lips, all unimpressed.

"Okay," he drawls. "At a *push*, I could go for Saint-Saens' *Aquarium*."

Hermann rolls his eyes and insists he wants to be *calm*, thank you. "Surely Holst and *Venus* would suit better."

Newt huffs. "'Bringer of peace'? So *obvious*. You are better than this, my man."

"*Fine*," Hermann counters, drawing himself up even taller where he is looming over Newt, who is sitting on the floor surrounded by bits of the machine and *waiting* to programme it in. "Vaughn Williams. The— *The Lark Ascending*."

He is strangely hesitant on the words, as if he is embarrassed. It's not like Newt hasn't heard him listening to it a *million times* in the last few years, all quiet, over in his corner, like no-one will notice. Newt *notices*. It's what he *does*. So he makes an exaggerated snoring noise, and mimes slitting his throat with the component in his hand.

Hermann smacks him in the shin with his cane, then apologises even *as* he's hissing and rubbing it, because it was already grazed there, shit - though he's laughing, too.

"Fuck, *alright*." He holds his hands up in case of second attack. "Chopin? Didn't you say you liked him, once?"

"Oh, *no*, not for this," Hermann says, dismissively, turning to thoughtfully run fingertips along the cable of the helmet instead.

Newt wants to laugh, *and* scream. All the familiar feelings of working with Hermann.

It's weird to think this might be last time they *do* this, though, in this lab at least - unless he does something, unless he really steps *up*.

Suddenly he sort of wants to cry, again, and needs this *sorted*.

"Time's –a-ticking, Hermann..."

"I know for a *fact* that you have never owned a watch, do *not* start that."

They had to use Hermann's, actually, to set an alarm. Newt could, of course, have rigged one up using any one of the bits of machinery around them, but he appreciates a bit of old-school, the way Hermann does, sometimes.

So. Background noise? They discuss going with static, but that is way too *The Ring* for Newt. Hermann has no idea what he's talking about, quite obviously, but just agrees. Newt suggests their heartbeats; he can set it to record and amplify, like an electrocardiograph. And oh no, that would be *infinitely* stressful, Hermann says.

"Like being in a hospital."

Well. Shit. Newt's not going to argue with *that*.

Although.

"I *could* make a joke about your relationship with doctors here, but I'm resisting," he points out.

Hermann smacks him again.

Finally, they decide the safest backup is just to add the cursor, blinking. Quiet, unobtrusive. It reminds him of early computer games, as a kid, the ones he was playing at a couple of grades above his level where you had type in choices with just the right, rage-inducingly *precise* phrasing - and it reminds Hermann of his early programming days, of sneaking onto Dietrich's computer, he admits, making Newt snort, and of TU, so they both find it strangely comforting.

Newt sets it up, and then they're ready, so he pushes himself off the floor and stands up opposite Hermann. They avoid each others' eye as they ease the caps back over their heads, and he's pretty sure they simultaneously try not to puke at the familiar weight of them. He does, anyway.

Oh, fuck.

They're really *doing* this again. Only this time with nothing else to deviate from it just being *them*. Hermann, in his head, where he can't hide behind the kaiju.

He picks up the control pad and lays it over the machine as agreed -where they can both reach it, in case of a problem. Hermann leans his cane carefully against the desk behind, and then straightens his vest, in preparation, tugging it down and smoothing palms down the front. It's cute, and also, *his hands* - andreallyhe needs to *stop* all that because Newt's trying to keep his head clear of that kind of thing, *crap*.

"We'll keep it short," he repeats, to reassure himself and Hermann. "There won't be any interference, so we should stay in control. I'll just hit the switch here when the alarm goes, in case we've forgotten or, or chased a rabbit. I don't even *like* rabbits, you know. Too simplistic. I mean, I get the lexical reason behind the terminology, *obviously*, I just—"

"I will hit it," Hermann says, interrupting what he knows Newt well enough to know is going to be a rant that he doesn't have the patience to pretend that he doesn't care about. "*You* are probably going to get distracted by *something*."

"Hey, I promised I wouldn't *pry*, dude. Scout's honour." Newt rolls his eyes, but the apprehension is heavy, suddenly, in the pit of his stomach.

"As do I," Hermann replies. "We will respect each others' boundaries."

"Think *door*, and think, *shut*, right."

A beat.

"I, ah." Hermann looks at the machine, fingers curling under the hem of his vest again, and

appearing pretty much *supremely* self-conscious. “I want you to know, Newton, that we...that whatever you might see, or *I*, that we are friends and you are— You are important to me. That that in itself *is* important.”

Newt is immediately very, very glad they didn’t go with heartbeat, because his is giving away *way* too much right now. He smiles, the word sending a little thrill of happiness all through him - but he’s also sweating *already*, and he doesn’t want to be *friends*, and he’s fucking petrified, suddenly, like he might never have been, even nose-to-tendrill with a kaiju, of the man opposite.

“Oh, likewise,” he blurts. “I really—I really want you to know that, too.”

“Of *course*.”

They glance, half-smile at each other. Hermann’s eyes are slowly going back to their usual gold. Newt hopes they don’t bleed again this time; nose-spurting is *not* the way he wants to start his new, post-Drift life.

He pushes his glasses back up his nose.

“A countdown?” Hermann suggests.

Newt pauses, totally panics, and then stops himself.

“Fuck it,” he says, and presses the button.

The caps grip and *squeeze*—

—and it’s different this time. It’s a rush, a slide, into an area that is quieter and less blue, more neutral, with the blinking cursor behind it sending beats of light like a pulse across a ceiling that’s not a ceiling, of a space that’s not. An interior, he thinks, and it is somehow shaped like the air carefully held between ribs, the potential of a cell – but Hermann thinks *universe*, and it becomes more open, more *endless*. Newt can still feel himself, observing, and he can still feel Hermann, sort of separate—

he’s waiting for Newton to press the button and he feels a little sick—

*he probably should put socks on with his boots but Hermann’s waiting on him, plus he doesn’t actually know where any **are**—*

Newt blinks, stumbles; that was a few minutes ago, fine, nothing too confusing, but then thinking *past* and *waiting* knocks him into—

—a bird, taking off, flying higher, higher –he can see it so much better from the neighbour’s wall—

—watching the celebrations on the anniversary, lifted up by papa to sit on what’s left of a segment, watching the candles, and mom’s singing along—

*—Bastien is late **again**, how he manages to take so long to do everythingis beyond him but there he is, waiting downstairs; they’re going to be late for **school**—*

—his first day and he isn’t just younger than everyone, he’s shorter, so, so much - this is probably not going to up his popularity—

Ohhhh no, no no no, Newt tries to pull away from that but the word ‘short’ resounds and repeats and he can feel Hermann tense—

*and there he is, the one person he's communicated with since the start of this mess who actually has the brains and nerve to push back - undoubtedly he's been strangely looking forward to and dreading it, since that bloody phone call, and it would appear, as he turns, that yes, the picture was right, he is **tiny**—*

Hey! Newt thinks, trying to change direction, not— but—

—shit why did Gottlieb have to have long legs—

comes through and before he can turn or backpedal, or back-swim, or float, it's—

—dressed like a try-hard, no surprise, but —

*—put his best shirt on, appearance is defense, everyone knows **that**, and he wants to look good—*

—a surprisingly lovely face under the stubble and idiotic trousers—

—well his ass looks great in skinny jeans, and why not, it's classic—

The Drift shudders, as they both do, reeling, spinning. Newt tries to be cool about it, *well it does*, and his mental shrug ripples – but the shape and the echo changes even as he's—

*—those thighs flexing and dancing on the **workspace** now, how **dare**—*

leads to

—he couldn't be more different to Jessie but maybe – shit, thinking about cyclists versus skiing and lean, lush thighs, now—

and

—when did rough, immature laughter become something he was drawn to—

*—those pants should be illegal, get the whole appearance, goes with the territory, right, but he's got no **idea** how he could look—*

A jump, a judder, lights are going, *noise*, in his head and outside, where Hermann is trying to step back; the cable brushes against the floor, metallic, Newt sways and he wants to keep going and he wants to cover his eyes, but they're shut, and—

*—always mock his clothes the most, he just wants to be **smart**, and it suits what he wants to do, why can't people be like Dietrich hopes instead of—*

*—he's been called crazy and weird most of his life, what's another, they don't really **know**—*

—the man is truly a genius and he's got a kaiju tattoo, how absurd, how brave –

*—how can someone so prematurely aged and **weird** about math be so **awesome**—*

—oh God, he has to admit the premise of challenge and understanding does make his blood sing—

*—work together like **no-one**, and he **listens** to—*

*—and throws everything into everything, isn't he **tired**—*

—remembered his birthday – guess he’s good with dates, right—

—can’t stop considering, thinking about—

—he’d never go for—

—didn’t respond to the suggestive e-card, of **course** not, he’s barely shocked—

—get over it, it’s too important—

—truly, singular, how rare it is to find—

—would want to change everything about him, for sure—

—how interesting, his eyes—

—shortass four-eyes, he’ll show ‘em: MIT at 15 and fuck **you**—

—are green, a lovely green, oh, **bugger**—

Newt staggers as the crack of a door slamming carries across the Drift in reverberations, and everything he was seeing and spilling stops, abruptly, like hands clapping. Was it him? The lights darken, the walls draw in, and he knows how Hermann hates to think about Walls but the space turns into a heavily defended *room* just as the alarm starts, *beep beep beep*, outside of their heads - Hermann’s going to press the button, pull them out - Newt tries to open his eyes in real life but can’t, the cap is too *tight*, it’s a little blurred, he doesn’t want to look, he wants to *see* - he reaches out semi-blindly but he knows where to grab Hermann’s wrist and pull it *away*, stumbling to let it continue – whilst in their heads he

runs he *runs*

he shoves the door open with his shoulder and it gives—

he spills out into—

him

him

him as he laughs and it turns—

Oh, fuck.

Newt had expected regimental lines but Hermann’s mind here is *huge*; all shapes and colour and digits connected by strange equations. Code spirals and numbers with trailing lines twist into new links, and everywhere is—

*him, the brilliant bright of **him**, what specific geometry, what a person to know*

there, in complex patterns. Nothing is logical or lined up, like he’d expected, nothing filed away but spread out; maps of his body, flashes of his habits, his face made up in numbers, his gestures repeated - times they have argued in spikes and peaks, times he has surprised Hermann swirling, changing—

his laugh, his mind, roulette curves of ink—

There flashes a memory of him designing one of his tattoos, and how his hands had sketched it, with such certainty; the number 6, *six degrees*, who has *six degrees* diverting off into other formulas – him working, *those bloody headphones on*, dancing along as his hands fly on the keys - the beat of his head nodding head spills across Hermann's mind in undulations and different shades, flickers onto him standing in the sea, in Sydney, singing; to him pale and ill; to him twitching a knee when he's overtired; to him putting a hand on Hermann's arm. It's himself, repeated, snapshots of times from the last decade that are out of order and infinite, stretching around the edges of everything else—

—structures, places, labs, *Shatterdomes* - trying to add order to his workspace—

—what *is* the ideal work partner, the golden ratio - perfection in humanity is a dangerous concept and either way he's **not**, he's scattered, he's silly, he's a child—

—so many freckles one could find constellations in them - oh how disgustingly *poetic*, God—

Sensory blasts of colour entrap Newt, then let him go, and something is flying – things are moving, dipping, arcing again, there is music somewhere, and he's *everywhere*—working on the DNA again - and there's a twisting helix in the centre that is filled with things *he* has done—

He staggers, somehow open-mouthed, taking it in. He. Hermann *feels*—

And then Hermann is *there*, opposite, *staring* at him. His shock is palpable and dark-edged, his worry tendrils of black that creep, his pale skin so exposed. In reality Newt's still holding onto his wrist — *so he swallows and grabs him by his wrist and pulls him, back* - he keeps hold, rubs his thumb over the pulse point on the inside where it's jumping like his and Hermann tries to speak and he - *drags him through another door backward to show him*—

Look, *you idiot*—

It crashes in and then just—

Newt stops *trying*— and—

Hermann makes a noise, skidding - *like he did in the bathroom, rushing to get to Newt* - but staying upright, as he sees himself.

How he is, in Newt's mind, tucked away.

Newt lets him examine.

Lets him see how he's repeated, made up of his *own* patterns. Words piled up; snatches of conversation, names he's called Newt, times he'd admitted Newt is *passably intelligent, gifted, inane, brilliant, friend*. Linear links, mirrored next to each other, each moment showing how it *affects* something else – how one thing leads on, how Hermann laughing *there* reminds him of *that* - and the *music*. He isn't synesthetic, not like Hermann, but he categorises touches, the feel of things, and *sound*, he sees it; the piano strings between pilots, Hermann's hands moving like conducting, touching his mouth like a crescendo, their arguments and time working in silence spiking and dropping like soundwaves – the bass jumping, his heart beating, his mind racing. He's always hearing it, re-hearing it; what Hermann thinks, says, and how it's *mattered* to him, like song. Something instant, something recalled. Newt never forgets, he worries, he swallows, he observes, he dwells, he keeps. He has *hoarded* Hermann. It has meant that much.

Hermann is one long line, repeating, with exact timing and detail. Dates, times. They have looked

into each others' heads and seen each other, mirrored back. Ingrained. He shows it; how the bit where they met glows as the most dense section of the pattern, the point from which everything spreads, like vines, even back into his childhood, into bits where he can think that Hermann would have been useful to know, would have been ally, incentive, distraction. Where he was *missing*. His habits, the way he works, his blooming smile.

Hermann takes a staggered breath and, and thinks—

—of course Newt singing in their mother tongue makes him irritated, because he desperately wants to know what German he would use when he's lost and babbling, as Hermann touches him—

Newt chokes and sends—*his face his fucking jaw his fucking mind his fucking **hands** - he wants it, he wants it all, please touch him, please love him, love him so fucking **much**—*

Sharp, tart raspberry flowers in his mouth, the taste of it shocking and rich, and he remembers that he thought that once, that Drifting would be like—

Hermann has the same flavour, he can tell, because he licks his lips, he *enjoys* it—

Newt sucks in a *breath*—

Staggering, he thumps a fist against the off button, and actuality comes back with a speed that is impossible to comprehend, that everything is the same. Their lab. Life. His nose isn't even bleeding.

Yet it still tastes like *fruit*.

He drags the cap off his head, dazedly, drops it next to him where it's tangled around his legs – and he *gapes* at Hermann with the cables still trailing around his wrist. His heart is in his throat, his dick presses against his fly, and his head *pounds*, but it doesn't hurt.

Hermann, fumbling to tug his own cap off, finally manages to unravel it and just drops it over a shoulder to the floor behind him, staring back at Newt. He's holding himself up with a hand slapped down onto the PONS machine for balance, because he's unsteady, his inhalations fast and rasping. His pupils are dilated-dark. Blown, with shock. With arousal.

Gasp. Gasp.

“...Are you fucking *kidding* me?!” Newt yells.

Hermann, reeling, shifts to press one palm against his chestbone, where his heart is trying to leap out of his chest. Newton just *stands* there, arms still thrown wide, astonishment etched on his face. His glasses are crooked. His stubble is rough, his mouth is pink, and he is everything Hermann had never expected, for himself.

He swallows.

“Newton,” he finds himself saying, first.

“Ohhhh no,” Newton begins, raising a hand and starting to kick his way out of the cables that are around his legs, “do *not* even *try* and tell me I ‘misconstrued’ something, I *know* what I saw and what— what I *showed* you— *fuck*—!”

He lurches free of the tangle by tripping, the pitch of his voice rising again.

“Don’t even *attempt* to dissuade me from the realisation of your, your massive fucking hard on for me, oh my *god*—”

“Come here,” Hermann says.

Newton’s head snaps up, to see that Hermann is reaching – of course. His fingers curl and uncurl in the air, his gaze fixed.

“Please,” Hermann murmurs, and straightens his spine all in a *snap*, stepping forward even as he does. His mouth tingles already, and he stares at Newton as he has never allowed himself. As he could have *had*— “Now.”

Newton groans, rushes the distance left, and even as Hermann grabs him by the collar he is already crowding him up against the PONS, and kissing him.

Their mouths come together so hot and fast that their noses bump, their gasps *colliding*. Newton’s hands are already on his face, pads of those fingers warm against his throat, but Hermann tugs at Newton’s shirt, trying to bringing him up, *closer*, even as their lips open at the same time. Newton grunts at the sudden pressure around his neck, almost laughing against Hermann’s mouth, all whilst trying to gasp for air *and* kiss him, *stupid* - but then he slides his tongue along Hermann’s lower lip and Hermann makes a sound that shocks himself. A *whine*, deep from his throat.

He bites back at Newton’s lips, mouthing what he bruises. Hands drop and fist in the back of his shirt, and he lifts his own fingers to slip into that idiotic, wonderful hair and *grip*—

Newton gasps, wetly, against his mouth, and breaks off so abruptly that he almost headbutts him.

Oh, God. *God*.

They shudder, pressed together, lips still close and breath mingling. Newton is panting, pressed hard against Hermann’s stomach. His own knees are locked, it’s uncomfortable, something obtrusively *metal* presses into his spine, and he never wants to move; he clasps tighter, bending to press his forehead against Newton’s for a second as he fights to catch a breath. *Any* breath, really, would do.

He cannot be wrecked so quickly, but he *is*.

Newton’s eyes up close are startling. His lips reflect the strip light, wet, and he *stares*.

“Holy shit, *Hermann*,” he moans, and shifts.

Hermann’s hips twitch.

“*Stop*,” he begs, and kisses him again.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

...Happy anniversary, team!

This was never supposed to take this long; I wouldn't have posted it if I'd known. 2014 was a rollercoaster and it took a lot of 2015 for me to recover, and get back to this. Sorry for the wait, everyone. Thank you so, so very much if you've stuck with this and are still here. I appreciate it so much. Please also note I've done a little bit of re-writing on an earlier scene way back in an early chapter, tidying up something that wasn't clear, so you may want to re-read.

I want to dedicate this to Sanna, my lovely friend - an unwavering source of cheerleadery support and swearing, and the maker of my most favourite (and only!) fanart ever that is still making my day every single time I look at it. All this shit's for you, whore. You deserve it. (Which sounds weirdly self-congratulatory, but you know what I mean!) Enjoy. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Kissing.

Kissing. Is a thing. A thing that they're *doing*.

Hermann's mouth is soft and apparently – really, *clearly* – wanting. Newt wishes he'd taken his glasses off 'cause they're digging into his cheekbone as he opens his mouth for him but fuck it, Herman tastes surprisingly *amazing*, a little bit like toothpaste and a lot like shock. And raspberries? And it's so *soft*. And Newt said that already.

His internal monologue is stuttering. He's out. Blaze of glory, mic-drop, *done*.

Hermann's long fingers are tight in his hair and happy shivers are tripping all the way down his spine from it, slippery - like his tongue touching Hermann's. Oh, *goddd*. Still, Newt's also badass enough to be compos mentis enough to be fighting with the back of Hermann's vest and shirt as he presses him back against the PONS, trying to get closer. He keeps scraping the backs of his hands against it as he curls his fingers through layers, trying to get to skin, but he's got to get *closer*.

He drags his mouth across to the sharp aerodynamics of Hermann's jaw, sliding his kiss down as Hermann continues to pull him in, *grabby*, but—

Finally, finally, Newt's knuckles brush infamously-secret-hidden-coveted-Gottlieb-lower back skin, instead of cold metal, and he is gone. Gone and *gone*. Away.

Happy place.

He strokes gently with his fingertips and Hermann sort of huffs and shudders, head tipping back a fraction. Back, for Newt's mouth.

Fuck.

Everything. Is. *Awesome.*

Newt groans, wiggling to get closer still, kissing wetly and badly at Hermann's chin. He wants to taste *everything* but he's a mess already. Half of him just wants to put his face in Hermann's throat and gasp, while the other half is about ready to lay on the floor and moan pathetically. Maybe with his thighs spread. Probably. Definitely. Huge things have happened and people he knows – *knew* – are dead, gone, and things are suddenly so different, and there's that, so very— *too* hard to contend with, being as it is so deeply, sadly *unsurprising*, and awful. And also there's that ache-deep headache sitting somewhere around his right eye-socket and throbbing. Can't forget that.

But he's *glowing*.

That's bad, right? He should feel bad. He *does*. But he also hasn't felt this fucked up-brilliant since he was a lot younger, maybe since he started at the PPDC, so he's burning on adrenaline and how much, how *much* has—

Recollection hipthrusts recognition as he kisses Hermann and suddenly Newt is back on day one, at the same time as being *here*. He shouldn't be thinking. He shouldn't be *thinking* – but of course he *is*. There are so many things that he wants to say. He pulls back again, overwhelmed, with a million near-misses of recall stabbing him right in the heart. Or maybe the *crotch*.

“Whuh—”

That was a croak. He tries again, just as Hermann makes that same, sharp noise of want and leans into him more, and makes it *super* hard to continue. “Wait, wait, I just have to—” Hermann's eyes open, dazed and blown and distracting, and Newt's glasses are probably crooked and his lips *throb*, but this is Important. He grabs at some words. “I— Oh my *god*, dammit, I have to! I. The *supermarket*. And. You!” He gasps, for a second. “*You* have a t-shirt complex, for definite—which you couldn't have *shared*?—and. Uh. The beach. Woah. And— and you basically tried to ask me out by e-card, what the fuck was *that*?!”

Hermann...blinks. “What—” he begins, but Newt is bang on topic and going with it.

“*E-card*,” he growls, getting all up in Hermann's face, and some sort of clarity finally hits his friend.

“...Ah,” he says.

Briefly, he looks stricken, his grip slackening and slipping until he is cupping the back of Newt's neck tentatively, watching him with a similar look. Like he's touching a bomb. Sure, Newt is clearly off-kilter today enough to interrupt the best kiss *of all time* with some things which are almost a decade old when actually, really all he wants to do is arch into Hermann's touch and mewl like a tiny, newborn kitten, but the recall is kinda dizzying. The other bit, there's world enough and time for that. Which is. A prediction. Newt's making predictions, because boom, suddenly the future's full of all these new potentials. Not just because the world didn't end, but because Hermann wants him *too*.

There are possibilities. There are Things That Might and Probably Will Occur. Newt's knees feel wobbly. He's still *gotta* address all these near-misses, though. Focus, focus—

“Well.” Hermann's breathing is just a *little* off. They're both crackling with the same sort of temporal shock. “...I could mention some of my own points.”

“Pffff!” Newt can’t settle upon the noise he wants to make, out of too many options, so he goes for a head-shake instead. “Nope – because you’re telling me – not that you *told* me, you’ve sort of not told me enough of anything but I *guess* we can say you said everything with your brain – you’ve just gone and shown me all this *shit* including that, neither of us actually really, really tried to—we... I...”

He runs out. He actually runs out of words.

He is *verklemt*.

“Well,” Hermann says again, glancing at the ceiling. Then he just...stops.

...

“Wow,” Newt marvels. “I hate us.”

And then he’s laughing. The instinct to just *laugh* lights him up, at the stupidity of everything that has happened, and out of sadness, and joy, and at this. At *them*. His giggle actually comes out one delighted, wild bark that Hermann flinches at. A few more follow and his knees sag with the effort, making Hermann to huff and grip his collar to keep him up, his own lips quirking in some amusement, too. His hair is sticking up at the back and somehow that makes Newt laugh too. Is this hysteria? Yep, hi. Damn fucking right he’s gone *behämmert* about it. Turned on. Staggered. Might cry? Heart-thumping mad and bad and dangerous to know.

Once the echo of his laughter has stopped bouncing around the lab and all its shiny, metallic surface area, he shakes his head again.

“Oh man,” he wheezes. “Oh man oh man. I can’t *believe* you. Who knew. You’ve got some serious onion vibes going on, here – and generally I can read almost anything into almost anything. What are we. *Why* are we? Normal people just ask each other for *coffee*, you know?”

“Yes, well, ‘*normally*’ is in absolutely no single or possible way the correct choice of modifier for *any* of the scenarios we have found ourselves in for the last few years,” Hermann replies, a touch bitterly, his mouth curving somewhere between amusement and frustration.

Well, alright. Newt pulls a face, but he gets it. This is how Hermann’s decided to feel about it forever, then. *Conflicted*. Fair enough. When Hermann gets this specific, it’s really best to agree; it always means something. Right now it means that he’s grasping at lexical straws to create a structure. Makes sense, too.

Newt gets it now.

He shifts a knee so that he can press closer. “Fine, fine. *Still*. Doesn’t explain how in the known world you could have thought I’d pick up on anything from you, Mr Locked Box. Genius, yes, psychic, *nooo*. Not yet, anyway. Are. Are you *real*? That’s a genuine question.”

It really is, suddenly. Hallucination is not a completely improbable hypothesis.

Newt blinks white and utterly panics for half a millisec— Hermann rolls his eyes at him, his brown, gold eyes, and reality is beautiful. Sharp and shiny, with mussed-up hair. A little blotchy, sure. Gorgeous.

“I must say it’s a little short-sighted of you to focus on such small things out of a decade,” he’s saying, mildly. Madly composed, even with the flush running all the way down past his rumpled collar.

“Yeah? Well whoever *ever* said you’re the better one with words has never met you, buddy—”

“*Newton*,” his friend tuts, expression tightening. The inflection is so familiar, so *him* that it’s briefly, completely disorientating that Hermann’s still there exactly as before even though the universe is altered and his eyes are bloodshot and Newt’s tasted him and he’s pressed up against him close enough that he can feel— ugh *fuck*. He hadn’t even thought about that until, until he— *now*.

Shit.

Newt’s brain takes a dribbling, turned-on nosedive all the way to his toes. He can *feel*—

“Besides which, I think we all know *you*,” Hermann continues, oblivious of his meltdown, “would have broached it with something violently obvious.”

The way his eyes linger on Newt’s mouth probably falls into the same category, and totally ruins the effect of any insult.

“Sure,” Newt stutters in agreement, with a little shrug that makes Hermann’s fingers press oh-so-gently against his topmost vertebrae. He’s *trying* to change the mental subject. Desperately, he zooms in on that other part of his body. That’s his C1 vertebrae Hermann is touching. ‘Atlas’; the brain stem. The weight of the world, lifted. Crucial. Central, cognizant. Connection. Drifting. *Hello C1, my old friend*, Newt sing-thinks, desperately – *ohh* but he’s hyper-sensitive there, and this is not helping, and he might be dying, and everything is more than a *little* bit distracting.

“Sure,” he repeats, stupidly, and leans in—

Hermann tilts his head sharply.

“Let’s not forget, however, that *you never actually did*. So perhaps we ought to move swiftly on.”

Crash, bang. Newt’s expression tightens, at once, like a zip being done back up. He straightens his shoulders and lifts a hand to point. “Hey. Bitch. I was *getting* there. I... I had *worries*.”

Worries that they’ve both seen and both had and both know, now, intimately. Remembrance and intimate knowledge of this rushes through them, then, as if still there. Newt’s pointy finger wavers. Time has gone strange, but it’s a not-unpleasant buzz of connection. Like touching something gently-electric. Hermann clearly wants to say something, but doesn’t - he shuffles, though, just one foot, one rebalance of weight, and then he shuts up whatever Newt might possibly have been about to say *for* him by moving in to brush the pad of his thumb along Newt’s lower lip.

Groan.

Newt’s full body-twitch pulls him back to extremely urgent Now. He licks his lip afterward in reflex, and Hermann watches, and Newt watches *him*, arching a little against the points of warmth along his jaw to tell Hermann with his body that it’s okay. They’re okay.

Hermann thumbs his mouth again, in agreement. A slow, slow drag. Oh, *fizzle*, crack. They’re not rigged up anymore but. It’s. *Fuck*. His heart starts thumping again, and when Hermann swallows he can see it tick right down that long throat. Carefully, deliberately, he slides his hands up under Hermann’s shirt and vest, up the bumps of his spine, to his scapula. Hermann breathes and his ribs press against Newt’s. They’re just *looking* at each other and he’s already gone. It could have been hours. Time is fractured and inconstant, anyway, Newt’s not going to trust that shit. They’re going somewhere with this. Have been for a decade - but now his thoughts are already rushing ahead, through his veins, like he’s plugged into something new.

Are they vibrating? Is the lab? Newt's *dick* feels like its vibrating, arcing and dropping again through all this mental battering of emotions and need which you can't necessarily call a conversation, yet it *is*. It's silent, but their bodies are talking. Sentences, paragraphs. Right now he's halfway to hard, pressed up against Hermann's hip - but on his bad side (the inevitable thump of solid, dazzling snow, the *ache* he still gets when he breathes in sharp, cold air; Newt knew, but now he *knows*—) so he might not be able to feel it. Can he feel this? Newt's got to, *got* to know. But knowledge is a dangerous thing. But that's why he *loves* it—

He can't stop himself from blurting; "I. I should have asked you for a meal or something." They're *sharing*, right. "But I. I'm pretty certain that would have been a disaster, so I. ...Didn't."

Hermann just nods again. "I know."

"*Right?*" That was a whine. He's not ashamed to admit it. One little word, so much *meaning*.

"Yes." Hermann sighs, but also gives a fleeting, small grin, all small and close, just a little crook in the corner of his wide mouth. It's too much. It's too pretty. It's *killer*. Newt shoves his glasses back up his nose to see it better.

"I'm over it," he decides, as they slide back down immediately, "and hey, we're alive, and really other than the deep, broiling well of rage and miss—"

Hermann reaches out and adjusts his glasses for him, totally breaking his flow. t's kind of a nervous movement but also super, *super*-intimate, somehow. Hermann's being tactile.

Wait.

Hermann's *tactile*.

Newt's world view extends a little. A lot. He stops talking. Already has. People aren't normally able to stop him but Hermann's being doing it for years. He knows, now. And *fuck* he wants to be kissed again. Why aren't they doing that? Oh yeah. Because he's being an *ass*.

He swallows, and runs his thumbs along Hermann's ribs instead, moves in again to chase that small grin, thinking of long legs and specific smiles that he hadn't realised had been just for him, hands and heart and lips and—

"Brothers!"

The call comes into the lab from the corridor outside, bouncing off their still-sensitive tympanic membranes. Newt wince-twitches again, as the lab door starts its badly oiled slide and whoosh that he'd *meant* to fix about a million times but then come to find strangely comforting. Meanwhile Hermann is startling so badly that he steps on Newt's toes, and a second later he's already side-leapt out of Newt's grasp, like an eel. In tweed.

Newt groans, slumps and headbutts the PONS, just as Tendo slips into the lab, yawning.

Upon entrance, Tendo looks no less rumpled than he did a scant couple of hours before. His appearance, both in fashion and in person, is as reassuringly predictable as Hermann had once found Newton's limited clothing choices. He really should have remembered that Tendo would

come looking for them. He is a very kind man, after all. With a questionable taste in recreational habits, but still.

It strikes Hermann then, whilst he gapes blankly, that he hasn't seen him since before they stopped the clock and everyone not assigned to static jobs went running out to wait upon Mako and Raleigh Beckett's return, or to begin the inevitable party in the Mess. Thus, since *before* he and Newton came back here to—

Well.

To? What was the original plan? Does it matter? More pertinently, Herman is just *staring* at Tendo as he saunters in.

His mind stumbles into action as abruptly his body did in order to get out of Newton's touch. Focus, man, *focus*. He shuts his mouth with a click, blanching. This is the first other person they've seen since second and third voluntary Drifts in a 24 hour window and that feels enormous; the first since before what Newton will probably in future term 'the great reveal', or some other such dramatics. It's equally childish of Hermann to turn retrospective *now*, but here he finds himself reflecting on their story as it stands, as it has been and where it is going, in this utterly inopportune moment when events are *still occurring*. Likely this is the effect of the brain he just shared his own with and its penchant for intertextual histrionics but, oddly, he's thinking of this as a winding narrative and its (un)expected epilogue.

Faced with sudden intrusion into it, though, the metaphorical bubble has burst. Tendo's arrival has brought the world back, and Hermann reels.

As luck would have it, though, Tendo is so distracted by his own appallingly enormous yawn, head tipped back and both hands in his pockets, that he doesn't actually notice Hermann's behaviour.

"Nnnnnnaaaah," his friend says, blinking his eyes open. "That was *good*. So! What's shakin', guys? You've been an age."

Oh, yes, nothing. Hermann just feels like an *entirely new person*, and also somewhat like he has been punched repeatedly. He tries to translate this into sane-adult words, but in the time it takes him to engage those thought processes Tendo has looked at them *properly*, and his dark eyebrows have shot up in surprise.

Herman's throat closes.

Tendo makes an obvious show of taking in the PONS that Hermann is barely managing to hide behind him. He'd once beaten Dietrich in Hide & Seek by managing to hide behind a tree in their garden and upon eventually having to reveal himself because none of his siblings were bothering to even look in the most obvious of places, his eldest brother had just sighed and said *Ah, natürlich, where else do you look for a beanpole but in the garden* – and gracious, that hasn't come back to him for *years*, yet there it is, flashing up whilst Tendo makes even *more* out of looking past Hermann to Newton, laying as he is collapsed over the machine three inches to Hermann's left and giving off oddly reassuring warmth along with a faint sense of hysteria.

"Oh, man." Tendo's shoulders drop. "What did you do?"

Evidently Newt looks as guilty as Hermann, even with his back turned. No surprise, really. It's possibly wise, as well; Hermann wonders suddenly, desperately, if it is actually strategic placement, and whether or not he has his own erection that he ought to be hiding. He cannot actually tell, his stomach has dropped, his right thigh has gone numb and his left just wants to

twitch uncomfortably. Don't look, he tells himself, don't *look*—

He steels himself with a force of will or stubbornness that may not be entirely his own, and clears his throat.

“We're quite all right, thank you.”

“...I didn't ask that.” Tendo crosses over the last few steps towards them. “I asked what you *did*.”

Newton snorts, his face and the sound muffled by his own forearms. “Smooth.”

Hermann thinks about scowling at him, but instead finds himself jerking back from Tendo as his friend looms in very, very closely.

“You look weird.” Tendo makes an aborted movement toward him, before flattening a palm against his own crooked bowtie instead - as if he'd planned to put his palm on Hermann's forehead, before thinking better of it. “Kinda...shiny.”

“Pardon me?”

Tendo shrugs. “What? You're clean, which is a step forward for everyone, but you still look... bright? Plus,” and here he *points*, “—close proximity to dangerous machine and rattled-looking Newton G does *not* look good for how the rest of my evening will go. Morning. Um. Day? Just, please tell me he didn't make you do anything else really stupid? Please.”

“Woah, *hey*.” Newton twists to prop an elbow up on the PONS and give Tendo a glare. “I'll have you know—”

Hermann puts a hand on his arm to temper him. “Tendo. We are perfectly capable of making our—I, *I* am perfectly capable of making my own decisions,” he stutters, then clears his throat, and glares. “*Thank* you very much.”

Tendo looks at him again. “Yeah?”

That seems to have more meaning than one syllables should hold. Hermann holds his gaze. “Yes,” he replies, with certainty.

...Yes?

Tendo huffs, then tilts his head. “Fine. I'm just saying, though, do I need to get a medic? Because, I've gotten good at that.”

It stings, a little. Bittersweetly, as Tendo shrugs once more when he realises what he has said. There is such *weight* of experience between them all. They feel it then, a momentary ache that swells and then resides.

“Well, dude,” Newton says, after actually, shockingly, respecting the moment for once, “we've got enough doctorates between us to be qualified enough to do that bit on our own, if we needed to. You're that worried, I'll examine him— or, uh, yep. I'll look out for him. Doctor style. Stuff. That's easy. Don't sweat it!”

And here, awfully, *wonderfully*, Newton *blushes*.

‘Casual’. Right.

Hermann sighs.

“Do be quiet, Newton,” he pleads.

“Uh, *no*?”

So Hermann kicks Newton, without looking, as if that constitutes a valid repartee. It is all he can think of. Newton prods him back in response, right in the ribs he was so pleasantly touching previously, until Hermann slaps his hand away – all whilst trying to appear effortless. Yes they are, perhaps, screamingly obvious, but what can Tendo actually *know*? Nothing.

What had *he* known?

Not quite enough.

He’d quite like to get back to the discovery, actually.

He continues to try. Tendo is *observing*, and his eyebrows are *lifting*. A bead of sweat drips down the back of Hermann’s neck and he lifts his chin to counteract it. ‘Play it cool’ is a ridiculous expression; Hermann is *hot*. And where is his *cane*, he thinks, out of nowhere, and glances at Newton with unexpected certainty that he will know—

Hermann finds his— his friend, watching him, and unexpectedly breaking into a grin when their eyes meet. It surges up onto Newton’s face like champagne, honest and sweet and impossible to smother. Hermann knows that feeling. How unfair that Newton recovers so quickly. How terrible, and how beautiful. His face, his freckles, his hair a damp disarray. His mirth and his honesty give Hermann pause. How could it not. How did it *ever* not?

“We had an... issue,” Hermann announces, to Tendo, tearing himself away. “Which we have now fixed. I suppose that the party has be...gun?”

His question falters, at the end, in light of the expression on Tendo’s face.

“*Oh yeah*,” Tendo says, wearing his own blinding, abrupt grin. “You guys are way late to the *Party*.”

Hermann is fairly certain he goes bright pink, right down to his ankles. One of them actually throbs in embarrassment.

“Okay!” Tendo says, clapping his hands together. “*Haha!* Um. I was going to. Well. I thought you guys should come. It’s only *kind* of a big deal. But don’t worry! You should...rest. Right. Good plan.” He chuckles, squeezes Hermann’s arm, does fingerguns at Newton like a *prat*, then touches his own slicked hair awkwardly and steps away.

“The party,” Hermann repeats, weakly, after him. Surely he can salvage *something*. “We. No, we should come to that, you’re right.”

“Whoosawhat now?” Newton straightens up, as Tendo turns back. “You what? And when? And *who*?”

“The. Ah.” Hermann glances at Newton. *Help* me, he thinks. “The party. We really ought to go, I suppose, it is important to celebrate—”

“Since *when*?! ”

“Oooh *shit*,” Tendo murmurs.

“You...don’t wish to?” he asks, carefully.

Newton throws his arms into a complicated set of gestures. “For that? Yes! Later. Much. This? More!”

It is a *terrible* sign that Hermann understands him. It’s gibberish, and yet. He would have gone to make Newton happy, not just for himself, for he *is* well aware how important it is to mark the moment - this one and all of others. To reflect and remember and celebrate, and possibly for once to just *relax*. To simply...be. Yet Newton does not want to go.

“But you...love parties?” The question is weak at best.

Newton screams a little, briefly gripping at his hair. “Oh my *god*, what have I done. Who are you? You want to rock out? I can’t believe you think we’re capable of partying right now.”

“Are we...not?”

Weren’t we partying a minute ago? a familiarly scratchy voice in his head provides, and Hermann is so utterly appalled at himself for a moment that he misses the beginning of what Newton has begun ranting at Tendo, after screeching again and then jumping up onto his feet. He tunes back in somewhere around:

“—balls, and seriously, I love you, Mako’s amazing, I’m crying from every internal and mental orifice, I might even want to kiss Beckett-Boy but *no*, no, we are not coming right now. Yet. Obviously. Sorry. We’ll... Later!”

“Hey man, no arguments from me,” Tendo says, hands up, placating. Newton blinks, and then deflates, grinning boyishly and crookedly, at Tendo.

“Oh. Neat.”

Hermann is...not keeping up. Tendo grins as well, and then surges again, as they had earlier, with the same sort of abandon and joy, knocking the wind out of Newton in a hug before slapping him on the back in apology. He pats Hermann on the shoulder as well on his way out.

“See you!” he calls, already half-running out of the lab. He stops at the door to salute them, though, extremely seriously, before hitting the button to close the doors behind him.

Hermann finds that he is touched by it, before he can stop himself.

Why.

He turns back to Newton, mouth open. Newton is still wearing that slightly nervous grin.

“I know what you’re gonna say,” he says, before Hermann actually can give any sort of opinion, “and I don’t *care* if we’re missed or it looks bad or anything about what they think, and that’s just for starters.”

Hermann frowns. “That’s not actually true,” he points out. Newton does care, and of course he always has - *fuck them*, yes, yes, he knows, his vanity is defence, that’s why he protests so much. But Hermann also knows now that Newton *doesn’t* care, not truly. He just thinks that he does. And now he knows that when Newton stops trying so hard, he simply is so very brave.

The contradiction is giving him a headache, but there we go. The conflict in the journey is part of the discovery. Hermann can see it now; how they’ve always been. “But,” he continues. “All right.

Yes.”

It wasn't really a question, but Newton seems to like his answer, after a pause, because he smiles, a little bashful, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Cool.”

Hermann smiles back at him – and then has to look away, down, bending slightly to smooth the rumpled seam of his trousers where it sits across his knee because immediately the room is heavy again with knowledge, and expectation. It's almost too much.

“Actually,” Newton asks, his voice a little strangled, “could you maybe just get back here? You're definitely too far away and I for one was a big fan of everything before Tendo's spectacular cockblocking.” He's already moving as he speaks.

“Actually,” Hermann repeats, reaching out ostensibly to hold him slightly away, but still he takes the opportunity to slide his hands around and grip his hips. The potential of his *skin* underneath is a little dizzying. The *want*. “I'd rather go elsewhere, actually.”

Newton looks down at Hermann's hands, and then back up. His pupils are suddenly dilated, again. “Oh.”

“Somewhere that involves sitting,” Hermann adds, because he can't deny that the adrenaline spikes have been interminable and his blood doesn't seem to be able to decide in which direction to go. It's rushing up and *down*, again, of course, because Newton's teeth in his bottom lip is a strange marvel. His leg aches, though. Distantly.

“Beds can be sat on,” Newton suggests, breathlessly. He is so close that Hermann can taste the anticipation. It's familiar. Somewhat like raspberry.

“Yes, please.”

Newton swallows, hard. “Awesome,” he murmurs, and then curls fingers around Hermann's left wrist, tugging his hand away gently. Hermann finds himself acutely aware of the movement as their fingers link, the pressure of Newton's ring, the way a couple of his knuckles crack and Newton chuckles.

Following, he lets the movement of those shoulders through Newton's shirt lead him. As they pass the PONS Newton pats it fondly, glancing back over his shoulder just so that he can watch him roll his eyes. The tremulous grin he gets when he does is in no way diminished by the fact that he knew it was coming. He collects his cane on the way, uses it distractedly for the last few steps.

The light is flickering in their corridor erratically. Lighting circuits are hardly anyone's priority; it's probably been like it for days. Previously he hadn't noticed but now he's seeing everything - including the fact that his own quarters are the closest and, whilst undoubtedly the cleaner of the two, they are also the more intimate option, for him. Perhaps the most suggestive. Indeed, Newton slows as they approach Hermann's door, sudden uncertainty in what had been his stride.

Hermann goes through the usual concerns, fleetingly, before deciding not to bloody *bother*.

Location is hardly important at *this* stage.

Neatly sidestepping Newton, he hops up the steps to grapple with the lock that he knows is sticky, since Newton won't. Or— will he? He turns to ask that as he jerks it open and finds that Newton has already moved in, his eyes dark and his mouth parted. Hermann tries not to but, graceful as

always, he stumbles backwards in reflex and loses his footing over the threshold.

“Shit—!” one of them starts as Newton lunges, managing to catch him by the belt and the vest. Their heads nearly knock together, the cane clattering to the floor. Newton’s glasses leap up into his hair with the movement and land too far down on his nose.

He peers over them at Hermann, in amusement. “...Wanna wait for me there?”

“That was entirely your fault,” Hermann gripes. He thinks that he ought to fold his arms but instead finds that they slide up against Newton’s chest, grip curling into his collar again like an afterthought. This is to steady himself. Yes.

“Hey, you’re falling at my feet now, I get it.” Newton grins.

“Oh, hush.” Hermann takes a breath and closes his eyes and blindly catches a kiss, because he *can*, and he’s been waiting too long as it is.

Newton *mmfs* happily into his mouth, melting against him until they press together, Newton’s infuriatingly tight little thighs up against his and his hands sure on Herman’s back. This mouth is addictive already, so wonderful. Hermann could still be stumbling, but is certain that he can put himself entirely into Newton’s hands. He has been for longer than he realised, in many ways.

There are *so many ways* to touch him.

Newton’s tongue touches his and he makes a sound, all in through his nose and shaky exhale. It would be embarrassing if he cared more. He wraps his fingers tight into Newton’s shirt and pulls it with him, backing up into the room. *Skin, sleep, skin*, he’s thinking - or someone is - as they trip backwards together.

After lunging for his cane on the way, throwing it somewhere behind them, Newton also manages to slap the light on and shut the door behind them, all with an impressive lunging display of dexterity and the flat of one of his stupid boots. Together they manage to traverse the few steps backwards to Hermann’s bed with a combination of knees and forearms and fingers that is surprisingly enjoyable, even though Newton has to spend half of it on tiptoes to reach Hermann’s mouth.

He doesn’t seem to mind.

They do really well, even managing not to trip over Hermann’s second pair of spats, lined up by his washbasin. When Newton’s hands slide down against the top curve of his behind, though, Hermann gulps against his lower lip, stuttering forward, and manages to badly jar his thigh.

He can’t help but hiss in pain, bending.

Newton hisses in sympathy. “Augh, here, just—”

Hermann is backed into his bunk and sitting before he quite realises, then Newton flits away; yanking down his duvet and the spare blanket he has balled at the end of the bed to make them flat, hopping back to lock the door, rushing to the sink.

“I am actually all right,” Hermann tries, twisting the side of one fist into the locked muscle of his leg. Newton makes what he can only describe as a fart noise in response, and starts going through the cupboard over the sink.

He fills the cup he finds and brings it over. “Here. Fluids, electrolytes, salts, yada yada...”

Hermann scowls but takes it, draining the water in one. It makes him more tired, somehow, making his eyes heavier, sending coolness into his stomach. The metallic taste pulls at his recent recollections, but he makes Newton refill it and drink some himself as well, then catching his hand and tugging when he makes as if to move again.

“Would you *sit*?” he grumbles.

Newton smiles at him and does, but not as he expected; he sits and then keep going, sliding to squat at Hermann’s feet with a gentle hum in the back of his throat as if utterly content. His hands reach out and Hermann inhales so sharply that he— coughs, when Newton just starts to unlace his shoes.

Oh, *goodness*. Hermann isn’t sure if he can *take* this sort of anticipation and deviation all at the same time. He’s gaping. Again. Newton’s fingers around the back of his ankle are maddening, erotic; it’s so utterly kind, as well as frustrating. His heart is all over the place. He stares down at the mess of hair.

“Newt,” he says, without thinking.

A long, pointed moment, then Newton whistles.

“Huh. New kink for you saying that name, who knew.”

Another twitch runs down Hermann’s leg. See: maddening, erotic.

“Interesting,” he murmurs, about as much as he can say, and nudges Newton up with his better knee. Pointedly, he jams his toes into the back of one shoe and sock and manouvers them both off, repeats, and scootles back to make room on the bed.

Newton blinks. “Right.” Gracelessly, he kicks his own boots hallway across the room – one thump against the door, one over by the sink - and dives for Hermann’s vest, greedy fingers getting under it to pull it up and off. Then Newton’s touch is everywhere; a brush along his jaw, his lower lip. They start undoing each other’s shirt buttons at the same time and smile. When there are only three left on Newton’s he yanks the whole thing off, himself, leaving his glasses crooked again. Hermann can’t help but tut. *Lazy*.

But then, then there’s not much underneath. Swallowing, Hermann takes Newton’s glasses off for him, to pre-empt the inevitable dislodging again when he pulls his t-shirt off too - and because Hermann wants to do that for him.

He can feel eyes on him as he takes the hem in both hands. Newton skims the pads of his fingers over the back of them, pressing him on, gently. Echoing a movement they haven’t done yet. When he’s rolled it up and off, Herman thinks— Well. Hermann thinks that he *knew* that the ink was there, and yet *seeing it* makes it new. Hermann thinks that the colours are softer than he’d imagined, somehow – perhaps seeing the reality through its own eyes has lessened their effect? – but the lines are what gets him. Hermann thinks, look at the *detail* of the outlines. The black against Newton’s skintone and the curves along his mostly straight lines; riotous swirls below his shoulders, the greedy stretch of creatures across his flanks and stomach.

Trails curl below his navel and across the blend of muscle and softer flesh, in so many shades. Knowingly grotesque. Mad and magnificent and deep-etched and meaningful. Newton ought to have colours, somehow. It *works*. He ought to be unpredictable, a little shocking and marvellously honest, and soft.

His skin is *very* soft.

Hermann runs the back of his knuckles along Newton's etched ribs. "Ha! Uagh, ticklish," Newton points out, twisting away, then back to push Hermann out of his own shirt.

"You're not the only one, sadly."

"I know." Newton grins distractedly at him, pushing his shirt off, and then too busily involved in watching himself brush warm and rough-palm hands across Hermann's chest. It's lovely, and then it's too much; Hermann can't just sit and be *gazed* at for long. He wants to break out of his own body already, but in a good way, to madly run around the room with everything else that has happened thus far, as well as to sleep for one hundred hours. So, leaning in to bite Newton's bottom lip, he pulls him back with him into the old pillows.

Settled, he kisses Newton. When the man rubs a treacherous thumb over his nipple and makes him hitch-groan, he gets kissed in return, right through it. He can't help but smile up, a warm, lidded sort of smile. Hermann's had the same two bedding sets since before Sydney and this is the worst of the two – it had a pattern, once – but more importantly, he's imagined Newton in them, many a time. On them. Curling over him on his knees, his head brushing the strange shelf-wall his bed is tucked under, tattoos blurs of bright colour on his shadowed skin.

And there he is.

Hermann runs his hands up Newton's thighs, catching against his jeans and breaking him from the reverie.

"Wait, here— gimme." Newton catches one of his hands to kiss the back of it, then the inside of his wrist, then his palm, and then his middle fingertip, by which point Hermann has entirely lost whatever it was he was going to do. He feels wonderfully useless, pooled into the sheets like water.

"These shouldn't be allowed," Newton murmurs, mouth still close to them.

"...Thank you."

He laughs, letting go. When Hermann goes straight for his belt the sounds cracks a little.

"You know," he points out, attacking Newton's buckle, "I suspect we should be resting, not doing...this." The blood-bursts in Newton's eyes are fading and so, he suspects, are the ones in his own, but the replacement feeling is the pull of a gritty tiredness matched only by the strength of this *pull*. This want.

"Yeah, well my medical degree says you can suck it," Newton breathes, watching Hermann's fingers. Then he snorts, covering his face. "I mean! Uh. ...Well." He shrugs, and gives an expression Hermann is becoming very familiar with.

"Slip of the tongue?" he asks, meaningfully.

Newton grins down at him. "Slip of the tongue," he agrees, promising, lingering over the last sound.

Hermann yanks his belt in reply, determinedly fighting it in the cramped space. He also makes a point, after a second to think about it, about it actually happening at that very moment, but not so long as to pre-warn the lovely creature crouched over him, to run his own treacherous thumb down the seam of Newton's fly against the pressure behind it.

"Ahh!" Newton jerks and curves over to gasp, wet, across Hermann's cheek.

He turns to kiss the scratch of stubble on Newton's jaw as he tugs his belt free. "Help me with this." His voice comes out *low*. "Your jeans are always too tight," he adds, and Newton snort-groans and throws an arm down to pop his own button and yank the zip, somehow starting to kiss Hermann again even as he's twisting his hips from one knee, to the other. Hermann pushes at the worn denim too, blindly, until he assumes they must be down his thighs, mostly off. That's enough effort from him, Newton can do the rest.

Newton plasters himself bodily back over Hermann at once, down on elbows either side of him, mouth wet and open on his. The sudden *press* of him against Hermann, belly to shins, is incredible. Hard, warm, heavy.

Then Hermann realises that he had no boxers on, under those jeans.

"Oh, you—" He breaks away to try and look – not easy with Newton nosing his head back to lick a stripe over his throat – then gives up and just grasps what he can; a good, measured handful of Newton's behind in both palms so he can squeeze, test the gorgeous resistance of it. It's a truly, truly delicious bottom. When he spreads his fingers to dip toward the highest muscle of his thighs Newton *whines*, breaking away.

"*Shit*. Hands," Newton complains, into his throat. This makes no sense, and is entirely clear, all at once.

Hermann wishes abruptly that he were naked already. It's turning out to be too much effort, and taking too *long*. He's tired. Newton's mouth makes its way back to his jaw and the hollow below it, scraping teeth against his clavicle, making his hips twitch up and his lips part. The sweet drag and slide of fabric against bare pressure from Newton is really not enough.

"Could you," he huffs, into Newton's hair, and that's as far as he gets.

A kiss to his pectoral and then Newton has insinuated fingers under Hermann's waistband with its wonky button, his zip and his briefs underneath, all at once. He then somehow manages to open, undo, curl, and pull them both down with a lift and roll of another of those dextrous, limber movements that he seems to be very good at, particularly in the tiny space. He slows when he gets to Hermann's upper thighs, partly taking care over his injury and partly just so that he can watch him be revealed, curving up and free against his belly as soon as there's room.

The thought—the *knowledge* of this, the way Newton turns all that concentration on him, his mouth parting unconsciously and then quirking, once, a little greedy, makes Hermann want to moan. He's *trying* to look his own fill, but Newton licks his bottom lip, all shoulders and colourful limbs over Hermann, and it leaves him torn between watching Newton's face or taking in the rest. Something about the way the ink trails off across the top of his wrists drives Hermann mad with want. So *much*; the flex in his unmarked legs as he sits back on his feet, the grazes on his knees from the insanity of the last 24 hours and the bite of grit into them, on his knees in front of kaiju; the freckles underneath the tattoos on his shoulders, the ink dancing down over his hips and the dark flush of his balls under the hair on his navel, his thighs. The way his cock curves gorgeously and a little crookedly to the right, thick-tipped.

Hermann feels suddenly and viciously fond of that slight kink and curve. He knows, now.

It makes his mouth feels empty.

"*Hermann*." Newton shudders again, staring down at him. Not at his scar, not at his too-sharp hips or the red line this pair of trousers always leaves against them, having been too tight since he replaced a lost button with one an inch too far in a couple of years ago and could never muster the

energy to fix - but with heavy eyes at his thighs, his chest, his own member. Hermann swallows.

“I agree,” he says.

Whatever the question was, yes.

Newt isn't sure he could say later exactly how he managed to strip Hermann fully. Not just the lack of space – physics be damned! – but how he almost stopped at the fucking heavenly moment he got the man down to bare hips and pale, long legs. Long dick.

Seriously.

Long, in the best way, a heavy length already damp in the creases of the end, jutting out at Newt like a gift from the universe.

A *gift*. All this skin, barely freckled down the arms but so clean elsewhere . He's got a cluster of moles above his left knee that Newt already wants to name – he ducks in to kiss them and Hermann kind of whines, through his nose. He'd also like to write his own somehow on the soft cut of those transverse abdominals he can definitely see below him, as Hermann takes deep breaths, all spread out. Ohhh, yep. Called it. Newt had thought, imagined, *dreamed* in a nightmare sort of way for a decade that he might have those, what with all that reaching up to wildly write or gesture at Newt or shift books or lunge for his cane or chase him around arguing with him whenever possible.

Vector of those gorgeous fucking clavicles divided by the length of his legs was always going to equal...something. Hot ass torso, right. Whatever, Hermann does the math, Newt does the *staring*, because he was right. Hints of those muscles cutting down to his navel, lean sides and a wide sweep of chest. Fuck. He could be grinning. His pulse has picked up so much he feels dizzy.

Barely a hair on him but dark curls at the juncture of his thighs, pale ones on his legs. The spread of flush across his inner thighs would have been enough to make Newt want to drop to his knees if he wasn't already awkwardly positioned on them. A steady patter of colour coming up under his skin. So *much* skin.

His to touch. It's too much.

Pretty much every muscle he has aches at this point, but of course his dick doesn't care, and neither does he. He dips to kiss Hermann's sternum and swipes his tongue over the same nipple he thumbed earlier, to see what it makes Hermann do – a guttural sound, arching into him. He runs his palm up Hermann's unscarred thigh and then the other one for good measure, the ripple of old stitching whisper-smooth, then lets the side of his thumb brush really, super close to Hermann's cock.

Newt has to sit back to watch when he briefly strokes the tip. Hermann gives a choked-off sigh and slumps back, all throat.

“Newt,” he gasps, again, ruining Newt's life. Again. As does his couple of insistent kicks against the fabric still bunched at his knees. “*Please.*”

Wow, okay. Newt tugs Hermann's clothes the rest of the way off, and curls back in.

Hermann is more ready for him than he was expecting, pulling him down into the lift of his hips and rolling them over. Newt wants to worry about his thigh but the slide of heat and friction-weight as Hermann's body covers him is immediately a big fucking deal, his cock dragging right against Newt's.

"Oh ff—" He slumps, boneless. Hermann presses him into the mattress and shakily exhales, right in his ear.

It's way too much for both of them, and not enough; the mental connection between them is definitely fading but Newt wouldn't have needed it to get *that* much. Hermann lifts his head to look at him and his hips rock once, twice.

Newt's thighs open like a song, one of his knees knocking into the wall.

"*Godddd.*" Hermann grits his teeth, shoulders curving. Newt tries to take a full breath rather than strange, shallow ones, rolling his hips in reply.

Pushing up onto one hand, Hermann kisses him; Newt tastes his tongue and slides his hands down around the back of Hermann's thighs, getting a good grope of his ass in, too. He kind of wants to die when it makes Hermann press back into his touch, hitch forwards, sighing into his mouth.

"Dude," Newt groans. "Help."

That makes Hermann laugh, a low, sleepy sound. It's kind of unacceptably sexy. Newt drags him closer, bodily. Hair sticking up, lips swollen, pupils big, this is a good look for him and he wants some more.

"Stop staring," Hermann mutters, pressing his forehead to Newt's and his ass into Newt's hands.

"No—*ohh.*"

He *was* going for carefree, but loses it 'cause Hermann reaches down and takes hold of him, wrapping those gorgeous, *evil* fingers around Newt's dick in the cramped space between their bodies. A loose drag along the length and then a twist at the head. It's just the whisper of his palm and then a grip again, probably just a test, but one of Newt's legs jerks, his spine forgetting to exist, so Hermann does it again, watching him. A push-slide back, and another. Another.

He uses the twist again at the end of that one.

Newt *keens*, unbidden.

"Oh," Hermann rumbles, and watches him open-mouthed, half going up on one knee to jack him steadily and just, just the right side of too tight. "That's rather nice," he tells Newt, in a tone of voice that makes his stomach totally *swoop*.

He gapes, a bit. It's really so very tempting to give in, close his eyes, *go*. But. Newt might be in some other plane of existence right now and all but he wants everything all at once, too.

"I— *Hey,*" he manages, pressing his feet flat to the sheets to anchor himself and moving a hand to get hold of Hermann, too. He curls his fingers and Hermann's cock twitches against his palm. World-changing moment, hi. His length is solid in Newt's grip, *hot*, and he strokes it a couple of times and watches Hermann get all shivery, dropping over Newt in this gorgeous, lilting bow as his own hold loosens.

“Oh,” Hermann says again.

I've got smart hands too, buddy, thinks Newt. At the same time as *Oh my god oh my god...*

Hermann says something like his name, neck curved with strain, cheeks flushed. Newt smiles at him and rubs the head, swipes his thumb across the moisture there and really, really enjoys the full-body moan that gets him. He shifts; this is awkward and his forearm's already protesting but Hermann's slack, dazed look when Newt lifts one hip to push his cock through Hermann's loose hold and stroke Hermann at the same time is worth the effort.

A second, and Hermann gets with the programme; leaning in again to catch his mouth he retightens the circle of his fingers, to please Newt too.

“*Yeah.*” Newt kisses back, mouth wet. “Just, *nnh*, just there,” he directs, the angle all wrong for both of them but perfect, heady in their shared air.

The bunk must be half carbon dioxide now with how close their breath is, the way neither of them seem to be able to get enough in. Sweat is starting to prickle on his skin. His ring feels tight against his little finger and his tattoos look blurry, maybe even dark in comparison to Hermann. He's staring at *Newt*, now, hips hitching along with the rhythm of Newt's wrist and then echoing it; a push back for every pull, that little twist that makes Newt go shaky, which he answers with the pad of his thumb in a circle on the underside of Herman's cock.

“*Newton*,” Hermann stutters. He's still up on one knee but getting lower and closer and more wobbly on that hand he's still bracing himself up on, every time.

Newt sees a tremor go all the way down his spine and realises - he's holding back.

That. That's *garbage*. Screw that.

“Woah, wait—” Newt releases him, nudging him off with a push to his ribs.

Hermann jerks back, immediately stopping touching him, eyes wide. He looks utterly betrayed, and Newt kind of chokes, amused.

“Wait,” he repeats, shoves his hair out of his eyes, and then urges Herman down by grabbing him by the ass and *pushing*, flat.

Surprised, Herman's down off his knee and the hand he was on before he seems to realise. He slides, slick, into the crease of Newt's groin, and Newt's cock catches on his belly before doing the same, making him shout – he kicks the pillar at the end of the bed without meaning to.

Hermann's hips thrust forward in two, heavy movements.

Newt's eyes roll back in his head.

Shit, this is not gonna last long; not with his shoulders so wide over Newt and all of him pressed over him. Newt swallows hard and wraps his legs around Hermann, crossing his ankles over his ass, sliding hands up the length of his spine to just to wrap around him. He kind of wants to climb inside him, but he already has today, right. Later. Oh *shit*.

“Is this, I hope this position is okay?” he asks.

Hermann makes a guttural noise and shifts up half an inch. “Not *now*, Newton,” he growls, pinching Newt's earlobe, then soothing it with a sucking kiss. Newt gurgles, grins.

Their next kiss is all tongue, messy, rocking into one another. It's great, it's *so great*, but then there's a little twitch. Hermann's nostrils flare and he moves back and Newt opens his eyes, *what*. What did he do *now*, did he – he tries to remember, it's really, really hard, his cock is throbbing, he wants to come so bad—

“Are you...” Hermann takes a second, swallowing, then actually shaking his head to bring himself back. “Are you still,” he pants, “wearing socks?”

Newt blinks. Is he? Then he snorts, arching in amusement, all languid, bouncing his feet off Hermann's ass and watching his partner watch his mouth. “Yup? I really hate cold feet.”

Hermann snorts, and then groans with laughter, curving over him, sliding and rubbing and rocking his cock into Newt's, obscene, pushing him down into the mattress. As he keeps moving, Newt keeps meeting him halfway, and at some point Hermann gets a hand between the pillow and Newt's hair and grips it, tight. Newt's toes curl.

“Ookay,” he breathes, gazing up at Hermann, and then slides his own fingers into his hair, cups the nape of his neck. “C'mon,” he says, somewhere between a challenge and a plea, dazed. “Come on, pretty.”

“Oh, fuck.” Hermann *whines*, and presses his face into the crook of Newt's neck. “You, you—” His hips find a rhythm which Newt realises he's gasping along with, so he closes his eyes, throws his head back, fucks forward, and when Hermann gasps again and scrapes teeth against his pulsepoint he is done, blown.

Newt comes in three thick, long spurts, squished between his belly and Hermann's, and sobs a little at the ceiling.

Hermann spills barely 10 seconds later, the pulse of his cock something distant. The twitch of his fingers and double-jerk of his hips possibly the best, best thing Newt's ever done.

Felt.

Had?

He can't syntax anymore.

His chest heaves. “You, um.” He rubs his cheek against the top of Hermann's sweaty hair. “You ruined my grammar.”

Hermann lifts his head, mostly – it's a little wobbly but Newt'll let him have it – to stare at him.

“...You... What?”

“See, you did it yourself, too.”

He tries to point. His arm is shaking.

Hermann just stares a bit more, but he looks so nice Newt can't deal with his life any longer. He tests how much he can move his hips - not much, given the slippery moment and Hermann's automatic grimace, his own tired bones, but somehow, even so, his cock twitches. A little pathetically, sure, but he's proud of it.

Hermann must feel it, because his eyes go somehow even more lidded.

“Ohhh, I’m gonna do so much to you,” Newt promises.

Hermann’s nod is slow, amazed, catching his breath. They kiss, again, before Hermann rolls free and onto his back next to him, just about fitting in the space with his elbows up against the wall. Newt gropes on the floor for his tee and offers it to Hermann first, who can tut all he likes but that’s *manners*, dude, plus he still uses it so that’s a win for Newt, then uses it after to wipe himself clean as well.

He chucks it at the sink with some vague memory of Hermann’s that there’s a laundry basket there.

The blanket by his feet gets passed to him, somehow – Hermann must have pretty dextrous toes, Newt should look into that – and he realises his eyes had closed, so he spreads it over his hips and turns a little onto his side. Hermann’s gaze is a little unfocused, slow to re-open after he blinks. Newt puts a hand on his chest, feeling his breath come and go, up and down. Hermann noses at him for a second, taking this big, deep inhale of his skin, and Newt’s heart breaks a little and set off for the universe with a tremulous sort of flail of joy, so he kisses him, all close and fingers curling in.

“World enough and time,” Hermann murmurs.

Newt’s not sure about that but he likes it. He’s already planning what next, what *next*...

The whoop and bang on the door that wakes them, later, is accompanied by the voices of people he doesn’t entirely recognise. Newt jolts awake, arm flailing out in front of Hermann, who has been snorting softly on his chest. His friend sits up as well, head tilted under the curve of the bunk ceiling, pupils like pinpricks.

“Hope you had funnn!” someone yells through the door at them, with that particularly drunken lilt that Newt totally recognises, even if his heart is hammering so loud in his ears he barely hears it.

Other voices join in, shushing the first; another bang, a giggle, and then laughter and footsteps drift away down the corridor. Someone’s singing. It sounds like they’re dragging a banner and at least two bottles.

It’s. Uh. The party must be over?

Newt turns to see Hermann, one hand pressed to his chest where his heart must be similarly hammering, the sheet in his lap. They left the light on and Newt remembers a feeling of buzzing like a generator but they both still fell deeply, immediately asleep.

He reels, trying to think. Hermann’s mouth’s still dark, still a little swollen. So...a few hours? More? Long enough that Newt’s head doesn’t ache anymore, but his tongue does feel like he ate sand. Where’s that mug of water? His thighs ache. A smudge of come he missed has dried in the hair on his navel and it’s flaking every time he moves, turning to look around Hermann’s quarters as if an explanation’s going to smack him in the face.

He feels amazing. But maybe a *little* embarrassed.

“Um,” he says. “You fell asleep first.”

Hermann cuts him a look sideways, then lays back down again, re-arranging the blanket. “Lies.” He rummages under his own body – deeply and totally distracting, he has to roll away to do it, facing the wall, and he’s one long line of back, ass and thighs that Newt’s still a bit worried he’s only *imagining* he gets to see – then twists, and pulls out the actual quilt from under them, rolling himself under it, pulling it up to his shoulders.

Newt, still sat, is maybe a bit overwhelmed. Hermann's hair has dried flat on one side, and there are still pillow-creases in his cheek - or lines from Newt's chest, maybe. Curled on his side, Hermann props his elbow on the mattress, and yawns.

"Lie back down, you idiot." He extends an arm to him.

Newt wriggles, nakedly, using his elbows, to get under the blanket as he's been told, until he's pressing all of his side against Hermann. He smiles at this, though he's clearly trying not to. Newt touches his cheekbone, then his mouth, then his clavicle. Hermann slides a hand over to cup the swell of Newt's hip, thumb smoothing circles on the bone.

There's space between them, but not much.

Quiet, for a minute.

Newt flexes one foot.

"We're gonna need a bigger bed," he realises.

"Mm. Indeed."

"I. I wanted you for a really long time," he adds.

Hermann glances at his face, then curls his arm over Newt, under the cover, drawing him closer. "I wanted to shag you so that I could stop wanting to shag you," he sighs, and tucks his face under Newt's chin again. "For God's sake, how was I to know?"

"We're adults," Newt insists, into his hair.

Hermann snorts and tangles a leg with his, and that reminds him.

"Hey. Your knee strap. Do you need it?"

Hermann lifts his head and looms over him again, instantly, a sharp frown on his features. "How do you— Ah." He realises. "You saw it."

Newton shrugs in agreement, tapping one temple. "Yeah. *Although*, I don't actually remember that I did, anymore." It's true. He can't...can't get back to it. It's like a rockpool maybe, or a seabed and tides, something like that, water's not necessarily a safe simile yet but it's like the indentation of the knowledge is still there but the liquid's absorbing back into the sand. Ghosts, warmth. "I just know I did. I saw it. From you."

"Well, that *was* the point of the whole exercise. To close the connection." Hermann touches Newt's fingers, to get his attention; he's started playing absently with his bracelet. He stills, but knows that Hermann sees it too, then; things they shared are already blurring over.

"Kind of a shame?" he wonders. Do they need it to understand each other? Or, at least, to understand each other enough to remember not to fight the ways they don't. Did it fill the gaps, was it—

"Hardly." Hermann rolls onto his back, using the hand he had on Newt's hip to bring him over. Newt tucks himself into Hermann's side and utterly relaxes, letting all those thoughts go. "Though at least I retain enough to know where my Euler biography went, now."

Newt blanches.

“Oh *crap*.”

It’s been in the bottom drawer by his bed for so long he’d almost overlooked it ever wasn’t, since Harold handed its weird responsibility over to him; he’d let it disappear under dirty shirts and other books until he didn’t need to think about it, anymore, and there it’s still sitting, just up the corridor.

Hermann feels him tense and waves a hand in the air, distractingly. “Fret not.” He runs another down between Newt’s shoulder blades. “You haven’t cracked the spine, we’re all right.”

“...You’re terrifying.” It’s amazing. It’s better, it’s the same, it’s... It’s Hermann.

Newt’s cock is starting to show an interest again; he nudges it a little bit into Hermann’s hip and stretches all happily when Hermann grips him by the ass to stop him. It’s his birthday in just over a week. He’s going to be 35, and he’s going to ask really, really nicely if Hermann will fuck him, after the cake. Or before. Or during. And it won’t be the first time. This is already the best birthday present ever. Better than saving the world.

“We’ll get a super-size bed,” he starts, sleepily again, nose under Hermann’s jaw. “One of those quarters for couples. Or a house! Shit. We could get a house. Got all these salaries to spend. One where you can watch birds out the windows? I want a bbq.”

“...We may not agree on furnishings.” Hermann’s voice has gone really, really soft.

“So?” Newt leans back, to look at him, just to check. “You going anywhere else?”

Quiet, again. Heavy.

“Never.” Herman lifts his jaw with a graceful finger and kisses him. His morning breath sucks, but Newt loves him. Their families are going to *murder* them. He can’t wait. Hermann eats the last of the biscuits but will leave him the last beer, and he has, in the past, hidden Newt’s favourite scalpel when he wants some peace and quiet but Newt reckons he’s going to be the kind of partner that strokes down his chest in the morning with his palms, to wake him softly to ask if he wants coffee. He can’t wait to see him get flustered when Newt drops to his knees in their lab – this one? The next one? - and yanks him forward by his beltloops, and try to cover it up by complaining about his leg (*bitching*), as if they don’t both know that that leg tremor is the same as the quivery, flip-floppy feeling in Newt’s stomach.

He’s still exhausted, but every cell in their bodies is *zinging* towards each other. It did it through the PONS, it’s been doing it for years. They’re going to have to try and explain that in their report, he thinks, and asks Hermann if that’s the right sort of turn of phrase. Does he remember that, right?

“Newton. ‘Zinging’ is absolutely not a word you can use in your next publication,” Hermann says.

Newt grins.

“*Our* publication,” he amends.

Chapter End Notes

(Flash-forward epilogue: Newt proposes within six months, of course, except that Hermann already had a ring in mind, they spend another six arguing over surnames and wanting to mark it somehow but their deep, professional respect of each others',

plus equality, plus gender, plus fuck you -- before eventually realising that swapping might actually be the best option. Newton Gottlieb and Hermann Geiszler then proceed to confuse the shit out of the academic world for the rest of their lives.

Hermann pretends he doesn't enjoy it as much as he does.

Newt totally knows.)

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